Part of the first hallmark is teaching students about audience. Students' anxieties around handing in their writing is a very real issue. Allowing a part of yourself to be read by others can be a daunting challenge for many. I tell my students that, while this trepidation will never fully disappear, it can also teach us about how writing is a uniquely empathetic form of communication. The anxiety around letting our writing be read by others lies in the potential for a (mis)reading. In embracing a pedagogy of “mis”reading, students learn to understand the power of impact over intent. Where intent (I hope they understand or agree with I am saying) is imposition and requires the reader to ascertain your meaning, impact is composition and reinforces an ability to anticipate someone else's world view. Writing, then, especially the first hallmark, presents an excellent opportunity to engage what C. Alejandra Elenes calls 'border/transformative pedagogy,” a theory based on Chela Sandoval's oppositional consciousness, or the ability to embrace and understand opposing ideas. Writing for an audience is an opportunity to teach empathy. In this way, writing becomes a praxis of social justice, of what Paolo Freire calls “conscientizacao.” “Mis”reading is only possible within the writer's assumption of their ontological superiority. When students embrace oppositional consciousness in their writing voices, composition becomes a means of producing connection and community.

While our instructive instinct may scream at the mere thought of teaching misreading as a constructive part of writing, a closer look at the idea of misreading itself requires a self-reflection into this instinctual tendency. Close reading, to Bartholomae and Petrofsky, comes closer to “social interaction” than to “finding information or locating an author's purpose or identifying main ideas.” This practice of “pushing and shoving,” of “making a mark upon the text” and “speaking in the [author's] place,” is considered an “unusual way to talk about reading” (1). Close reading, then, involves the self and should allow for the self to infiltrate the intent of the author, perceived or otherwise. I choose the word infiltration carefully here. Defined as “the action of entering or gaining access to an organization or place surreptitiously, especially in order to acquire information or cause damage,” the act of infiltration, when applied to reading, forces us to confront the very powerful idea that authorial intent, even in its more traditional function as something to be revealed, must inevitably be circumvented. By this, I mean that good writing achieves its intended mission
without revealing the method. In short, we are taught and often teach that a good thesis statement, even at its most controversial, should never reveal its own weaknesses unless these can be used as a strength.

What happens when students consider the idea of close reading as it applies to their intended audiences? What changes when we move from emphasizing enforcing intent to embracing the idea of writing as a social interaction that goes beyond situating one's self into an existing conversation? This question can be answered, strangely enough, by having students embrace the possibility of misreading. Misreading, in this case, is not so much error as intervention. A good example of this idea is given by Hortense Spillers when she speaks of the idea of Creole:

“Creole perfectly names the linguistic “misreading” and adaptation...that historians attribute to Atlantic creole formations, from which the concept of [creole] derives. The languages that sprang up from fifteenth-century trading practices between European and African operatives along the Atlantic littoral have been described by linguists and historians as creative blends that facilitated commercial relations, as William Pietz puts it, “between members of bewilderingly different cultures” (Spillers 47).

This creolization extended beyond agents of the Atlantic Slave Trade to those who were forcefully moved by it to various places around the globe. Persons of African descent, when they arrived at these new locations, encountered persons from across the vast African continent. As such, the inevitable linguistic misreading did not deter these individuals from forming communities and languages that accommodated difference instead of eliminating it. It is this accommodation of difference that we can use as a teaching moment for students in English Composition classrooms. We are talking here not just about differences in language, but differences in religion, custom, and experience.

Misreading takes its role in this process in relation to empathy. While it's hard to pinpoint exactly how processes of creolization occurred, it is not far-fetched to assume that empathy played a key role in the process. In building communities across both language and ontological barriers, one must accept the inevitable misreading of one's comments and ideas. While it is tempting to posit that the common urge for survival motivated those who participated in the process of creolization to set aside differences and to form
community, this view limits the true transformative nature of creating meaning across difference. Misreading implicates both author and reader. In this sense, it's not just the reader committing the act of misreading, but the author that allows for and embraces that possibility. When a speech-act (or writing-act) occurs in this context of vulnerability, misreading becomes synonymous with possibility. As we can deduce from the Creole example, that possibility is community through communication, the essence of composition.

To return to the previous idea of infiltration. From my experience, it is infiltration that students often fear (or are taught to fear) most. When I assign Bartholomae and Petrofsky's Introduction to Ways of Reading to my students, the ideas expressed about close reading, reading with and against the grain, and dialoguing with a text are accepted, at least in theory if not always in action. However, the real challenge in assigning this piece comes when I encourage students to use the same criteria in their peer reviews. The practical reason for framing peer review in this way is to nudge students in the direction of giving comments more conducive to revision as opposed to mere editing and proofreading. The larger implication of this task is to introduce students to the idea of intent vs. impact. One of the requirements of the peer review is that each student, in their given pairing, write down in one sentence what they think their partner's thesis statement is. I then have students exchange these guesses to start off the discussion portion of the peer review. Most of the time, students are surprised with what their partner identified as their thesis. Not only is this a crucial lesson in the importance of making one's thesis as concise and clear as possible, but it also introduces students to the difficulties of anticipating the impact of their writing.

This exercise is built upon in the Op-Ed writing assignment, where I have students write an Op-Ed piece about a topic for which they have a passion. When students come together for the peer review, much more than the clearness of a thesis is at stake. In this peer review, I ask students to again identify what they believe the thesis of their partner's paper is. More often, the answer of the reviewer matches what the reader intended the thesis to be. The difference comes in how the reviewer articulates their partner's argument. More often than not, the author of a paper will find that the reviewer “misreads” their thesis, which necessitates further explanation. First, the very fact that this misreading occurs so consistently when it
comes to identifying the thesis is not necessarily an indictment of the author's lack of audience awareness. It's actually more about the reader's assumptions and beliefs about the same topic leaking into their thesis summary. As I try to explain to my students, these moments of “misreading” are loaded with potential for growth beyond the thesis. It is not about reinforcing authorial intent, or correcting the thesis so these misreadings never happen again. Instead, these misreadings provide opportunities for conversation. The reader has a chance to calibrate their interpretation to the intent of the author, yes, but the author's chance to hear the context for the reader's interpretation is, I believe, a moment worth dissecting. The revelation of the impact writing has, independent of intent, is a crucial lesson in engaging audience in first-year writing.

Impact gets at the heart of social justice and transformative pedagogy because conversation across and in spite of differences is implicit. When students write with the impact of their voices in mind, self-reflection and critical thinking become crucial. Audiences, too, transform from overdetermined groups and classifications to complex individuals. While audiences become more complex, the writing to those audiences becomes stronger. It humanizes the reader by anticipating their participation in a discussion where the writer does not have all of the answers. This lack of awareness, like a fear of death, prevents ethical breaches on the part of the author. Primarily, students begin to understand that, as authors and authorities on a given subject, their writing has the power to take advantage of the reader's previously held assumptions and beliefs (or lack thereof) as well as the emotional impact those beliefs have. Even when writing to other experts in a given field, they are not experts on your unique interpretation of a specific problem in that field. Students understand that, in writing these papers, education should not be a top-down process. Instead, writing should open up. Knowledge of impact leads to empathy because students must bear in mind the effect a reader's bias can have on how even their most well-intentioned thesis is interpreted.

A specific example comes to mind, one many of us have had experience with. In research papers, the topic of homelessness in Hawai'i will inevitably come up. Often, these papers horribly miss the mark. Why? Why do students have such a hard time writing about homelessness in Hawai'i? The answer, within the context of this paper, is simple: students, with their authorial and authoritative powers, fly too close to
the sun and overreach. While they may be aware of the political, cultural, and social issues surrounding a reified idea of “homelessness” seen on the news or read about in local papers, this idea is divorced from any real person and real experience. As a result, the papers they write are full of authorial intent. “I believe homelessness is caused by people who come over from the mainland and try to find an easy life here with the nice weather.” Homelessness is a problem. It must be solved. How do you solve something that is different for everyone, that cannot be defined by or encapsulated in one word?

Here is where we return to intent over impact, to empathy. Empathy is lacking in these papers because they are not addressed to a person. Impact is of no consequence, because students are addressing a problem that needs a solution, forgetting that human beings like themselves are involved. The limiter, then, is personal experience. What, on an experiential level, can a student speak to? Often, the better research papers are based on personal experience. This is why the Op-Ed assignment presents an effective path towards a research paper. Does this mean that students cannot write research papers, or anything for that matter, on topics with which they are not personally familiar? Of course not. What must be remembered is impact. When addressing an issue with which students have only secondary experience, it is helpful for them to remember the thesis guessing exercise. What would happen if their paper, based only on their reading of other people's experiences, was read by someone with direct experience of the issue? This awareness, and the self-reflection that must occur within the paper, is the result of embracing impact.

The logical follow-up to this self-reflection is the radical proposition that lack of direct experience does not preclude empathy. This is the concept at the heart of social justice pedagogy, what C. Alejandra Elenes calls “border/transformational pedagogy,” or what Chela Sandoval calls “oppositional consciousness.” Both ideas are based on engaging the philosophical foundation of an issue, of embracing difference and opposition. In short, embracing an issue as complex allows for a possibility in writing that is not restricted by the drive to solve. Impact means meeting the reader in the middle, so to speak. Misreading becomes an opportunity to learn. By anticipating misreading in writing, students open up the conversation instead of shutting it down. Particularly with the current climate around (and misreading of) freedom of speech and safe spaces, knowing how to engage one another on the human level is much harder than it seems.
Not to get too metaphysical, but I feel that I must honor my own call to action here. Composition, by its very nature, is community-building. Writing for and to someone else are very different things. I want to return to something I quoted earlier from Bartholomae and Petrofsky: that reading closely, in their estimation, is unusual. To be transparent for a moment, this comment strikes me when thinking about my own reading of student papers. When reading student papers, do I read them closely? Is there a back and forth, or am I merely looking for meaning? While grading is based on assessment of specific criteria, impact plays a crucial role. I realize that I misread intentionally. I ask questions as if I don't know what the student means, even when I do. I anticipate places in their writing where their reliance on intent clearly takes over. Grading papers, then, presents another excellent opportunity to engage the pedagogy of misreading. In this particular situation (and I am speaking for myself here), I usually understand what the student is trying to say because I am the one they are writing to, an unfair advantage if there ever was one. It is tempting, then, to cozy up to this secure position and to just let the text do the work I know it should be doing. Ironically enough, close reading works against me as an educator.

A more engaging option is suspending close reading in favor of misreading. If part of our jobs as first-year writing instructors is to teach students how to write for specific audiences, then I do them a disservice by reinforcing the idea of audience as someone who knows more about what they should be saying than they do. It is logical to conclude that an audience, while potentially experienced in aspects of the discussion, will not know more than you, and that part of the work you do as a writer is to break down your thinking process, to narrate your journey from point A to point B. At the same time, this more expert audience is exactly what often happens when it comes to writing about issues beyond the scope of personal experience. After all, we cannot expect students to only write about what they know (that would go against the spirit of discovery endemic to Liberal Arts education). After all, writing is thinking, according to the Writing Across the Curriculum philosophy. Writing presents students with a chance to probe the unfamiliar, to think through complex issues.

However, complex issues are sometime made more complex by real-life barriers. Misreading happens constantly when it comes to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and the human
condition in general. Charles W. Mills, in “White Ignorance,” figures racism as “willed ignorance,” a “cognitive dissonance” that is both enacted and unconscious. The cognitive dissonance originates from an inability (or unwillingness) to see the subject of inquiry as fully human. As students, especially those who occupy privileged and normalized identities, engage with issues of race, for example, they must confront their own cognitive dissonance in relation to these topics. Even when writing about issues that are familiar, students enact willed ignorance by not acknowledging problematic assumptions and traditions within their field. If the Humanities teach students anything, it is the importance of empathy and human interaction in all fields of study, and what can happen when this crucial human element is missing. Writing, as the cross-curricular common denominator for all disciplines, is the closest thing to a universal application of the Liberal Arts philosophy of moving beyond yourself.

First-year Writing courses, as the class that every student must take, is the place where enacted empathy can and must be taught. Misreading, as the manifestation of impact, helps students understand that writing is an act of empathy. Writing, as an act of thinking and an act of communication, creates what Paul Ricoeur calls “emerging meaning,” or an idea that “abolish[es] the logical distance between heretofore distinct semantic fields in order to produce the semantic shock” (168-9). While this emerging meaning works on the level of the idea, the topic of writing, it also applies to audience. The author and the reader may have different semantic fields, but that is exactly where emerging meaning happens. The semantic shock is not necessarily the reader's encounter with a new idea. Instead, it is often an encounter with a new way of articulating an idea that the reader already understands. This is what we see in the Creole example. If language signifies identity, as Gloria Anzaldua so persuasively argues, then the logical distance between semantic fields mirror distances between identities constructed with the words contained in these fields. First-year writing courses, especially the first hallmark, present an opportunity to teach students how to close this distance by exposing them to how the Manichean self/other duality limits the impact writing can have.

To conclude, I would like to consider the role of imagination in this discussion. Ricoeur thinks of imagination as the ability “to say that you think as I do, that, like me, you experience pleasure and pain,”
and that “This transfer through imagination of my 'here' into 'there' is the source of what we call 'intropathy'...empathy, which can be in the form of hate as well as love” (Ricoeur 176). An important distinction needs to be made here, one that applies to teaching first-year writing. Saying that “you think as I do” as part of a project of empathy renders it moot, mainly because the whole point of impact over intent is emphasizing that not everyone thinks like you. Intent, on the one hand, assumes a similar thinking process. It is based on correctness and convincing. Impact, on the other hand, embraces the possibility of misreading. In embracing misreading, first-year writing students are forced to confront an often terrifying conundrum: there is no end to this conversation. There is no one answer to any question. There is no one solution to a problem. And while part of what we teach in first-year writing is the act of convincing, it is important to frame it in an act of opening up as opposed to closing down. Like a good piece of literary criticism, research papers and argumentative essays should open up the text of an issue, problem, or conversation without trying to claim this particular reading as the only possible one. That is the spirit of oppositional consciousness. Semantic shock engenders learning.