

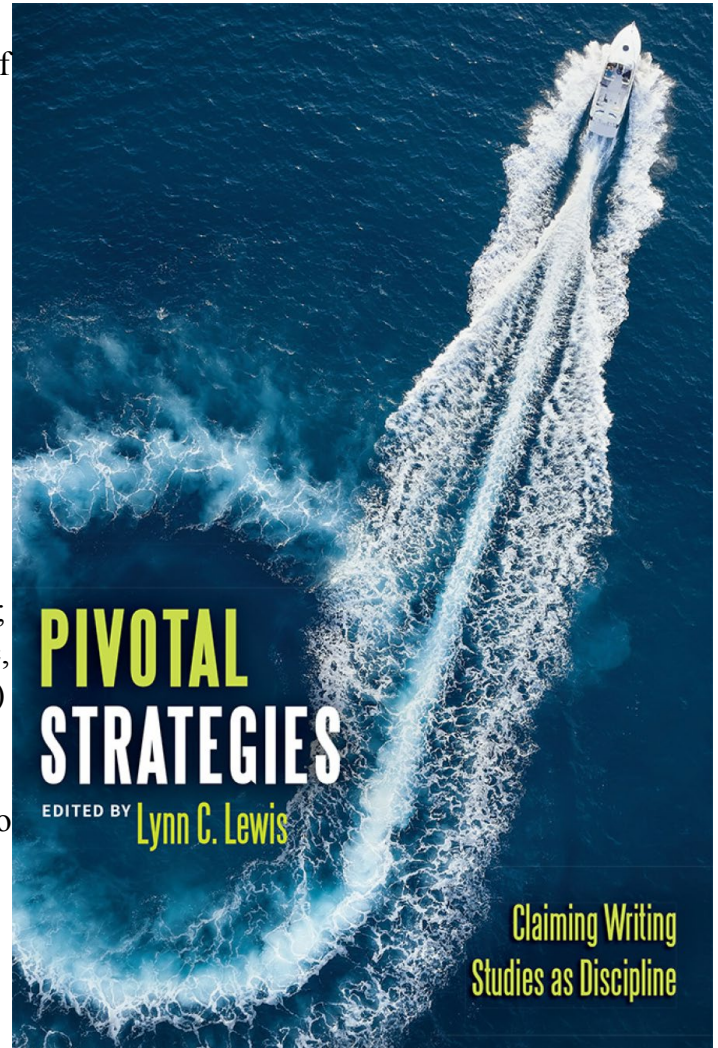
Review of Lynn C. Lewis's *Pivotal Strategies: Claiming Writing Studies as Discipline*

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Lewis, Lynn C. *Pivotal Strategies: Claiming Writing Studies as Discipline*. Utah State University Press, 2024.

Disciplinarity has long been a concern of writing studies scholars. In an attempt to solidify the boundaries and status of the discipline, scholars have defined keywords, outlined threshold concepts, identified foundational texts, conducted large-scale quantitative analyses of books, journals, dissertations, and conferences, and fought for recognition in official databases. As Lynn C. Lewis explains in her introduction to the recent book *Pivotal Strategies: Claiming Writing Studies as a Discipline*, while interest in disciplinarity isn't unique to writing studies, "the field's rigorous interrogation of its existence, methods, purpose, and exigencies is certainly unusual" (6). In fact, scholars like Kathleen Blake Yancey have even declared that writing studies is currently in the middle of a "disciplinary turn" influenced by four key factors: 1) a renewed research agenda; 2) the consolidation of established knowledge; 3) the rhetoric, composition, and writing studies undergraduate major; and 4) the shifting location of writing studies within the academy (17). While each of these factors permeates the exigence of *Pivotal Strategies*, the latter two are of particular interest to many of the authors featured in this exciting new edited collection.

In her introduction, Lewis argues that because undergraduate writing studies majors have been a rare feature of English departments until somewhat recently, many scholars and instructors have, at some point, "pivoted" to writing studies, often from literature, creative writing, education, or some other related field (6). Furthermore, because writing studies is comprised of so many "pivoters," the boundaries of the discipline and its position within the academy are often precarious. As a result, the act of claiming writing studies looks different depending on which scholar you ask, where they work, what stage they are at in their career, and what opportunities they've had (or not had), among other factors. In relation to these questions, *Pivotal Strategies* asks: "what approaches have scholars constructed in order to claim membership in the field... *how* [do] individuals, programs, and departments strategize their becoming, identifying, and claiming. What are their key—pivotal—strategies?" (Lewis 6). In other words: how have scholars, instructors, and administrators come to and constructed their place in the field?



The collection is organized into three main sections entitled “Kairos and Opportunity,” “Negotiations and Resilience,” and “Allegiance and Identification,” with a final concluding chapter by Christina V. Cedillo. Section I: “Kairos and Opportunity” offers several experiences of claiming writing studies that are “structured by opportune time and place” (Lewis 12). One standout chapter from this section is “Political, Personal, and Pedagogical Imperatives: Tactical Disciplinarity among Early Members of Writing Studies” by Lauren Marshall Bowen and Laurie A. Pinkert. This chapter reports on the findings of twenty-seven interviews with retired writing studies scholars who “claimed” the discipline before it was fully formed, often as a result of more “tactical practices” resulting from “serendipity, luck, and happy accidents” (26). Exploring the “cultural habitus” that influenced many early writing studies scholars, this chapter highlights how key historical contexts, such as the literacy crisis and the economic recession of the 1970s, contributed to the development of the discipline (23). This section also features chapters three and four, which examine the key kairotic moments of two different writing programs, offering insight into ways the authors fulfil their commitment to anti-racist assessment through “slow agency” (Wood, “Strategizing Disciplinarity, Disciplinary Strategies”) and navigate tensions with non-writing studies faculty in their English department (Brooks, Dadas, Field, and Restaino, “Embracing Failure”). Overall, the chapters in this section offer readers an interesting juxtaposition of both the collective and individual perceptions of claiming the discipline by providing both interviews and first-hand accounts alongside departmental goals and historical context.

Chapters in Section II trace “the many negotiations and state of resilience necessary to claiming the discipline” (Lewis 13). In chapter six Cynthia Johnson offers a compelling personal narrative of how her “tangled positionality of precarity and privilege” drew her to a field that champions professionalism, incentivizes uncompensated affective labor, and requires financial precarity (132). Adding a new layer of juxtapositions to the book, Johnson reflects on the financial reality of working in the discipline that is, unfortunately, all too familiar for many in the field. This perspective also offers an interesting contrast to the interviewees from chapter one who claimed to have entered the field to escape financial precarity (30–32). Expanding on the theme of precarity present in many chapters of this collection, Karen R. Tellez-Trujillo reflects on finding resilience as a writing studies student living at the United States-Mexico border. Now an assistant professor, Tellez-Trujillo uses that precarity to “help [her] students spot the resilience in their own lives, particularly when it comes to their relationships to reading, writing, and language” (159). Focusing more on individual perspectives and experiences, the chapters in this section effectively highlight tensions associated with claiming writing studies: privilege and precarity, resilience and resistance, opportunity and opposition.

Section III tells the stories of scholars “whose life experiences have inspired a keen sense of what allegiances they require from the discipline” (Lewis 15). Many of the chapters in this section use autoethnography to explore the relationship between who they are and how that shapes their understanding of what writing studies is. Khadeidra Billingsley does this particularly well in chapter eight, “Being the Only One: The Embodiment and Labor of Tokenism,” in which she examines the burden and cost of tokenism. By sharing her experiences as a Black female graduate student (BFGS) at a predominately white institution, Billingsley offers her “story and strategies for enduring” that may help other BFGSs who have similar (or dissimilar) stories of their own to share (180). While Billingsley adds a new intersectional layer to the theme of precarity explored by many in this collection, she ends the chapter on a hopeful note, shining a spotlight on the intellectual experiences and contributions of black women in the field. Through a series of vivid vignettes, Raymond Rosas in chapter nine recalls key pivotal moments as both a Chicano/Puerto Rican navigating the United States education system and as a survivor of the opioid epidemic. Balancing familial and academic allegiances, Rosas claims writing studies “in the knowledge that literacy—in all its varieties—is at once a vehicle for freedom and harm, a vector for

conflict—its generation, perpetuation, and, hopefully, resolution” (192–93). Truly harnessing the power of storytelling, Rosas offers readers a literal juxtaposition of analysis and personal narrative that highlights the familial-academic tensions explored in the chapter.

Overall, this collection effectively uses story as a methodology to illuminate the ways in which scholars from different corners of the discipline claim writing studies. In the concluding chapter, Cedillo highlights “how indispensable the act of storying is in relating lived experience and the valuable lessons to be drawn from the narratives we compose” (229). Recognizing “storying’s biopolitical rhetorical power,” Cedillo reminds us that stories are not only a tool for reflection, but also a powerful vessel for grappling with the physical toll it takes on the body to build writing studies programs and exist as a member of a marginalized community within academia (230). While I believe this collection may have been even further enriched by a wider variety of methodologies and more mixed-methods research, the “story as methodology” that nearly every chapter of this collection utilizes is one that deserves more adoption.

One of the most impressive strengths of this collection is the way it centers diverse voices. Acknowledging the ways in which minority voices have been “erased and elided,” Lewis explains that “while this book does not take up the racial politics of our field explicitly, the contributors’ stories here cannot help but be inflected by them” (4–5). Notably, Lewis isn’t the only one centering multiply marginalized and underrepresented (MMU) perspectives; the chapter authors themselves also contribute to the diversity of perspectives represented in the book through their citations. Several of the scholars cited in this collection also appear on Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyag’s [MMU Scholar List](#), including Adam J. Banks, Iris D. Ruiz, and Cecilia D. Shelton.

Accordingly, the authors in this collection pull from a diverse pool of scholarship forms to tell their stories and build their arguments. As illustrated by Figure 1, in addition to citing “traditional” scholarly sources such as journal articles, books, and book chapters, the authors also draw from popular press articles, websites, and even unpublished manuscripts and conference presentations. While “traditional” sources should be at the forefront of most scholarship, it’s important that authors also consider the perspectives of those who haven’t had the privilege of publishing in “traditional” venues. Plus, many “non-traditional” sources offer the most up-to-date perspectives, as they have not had to sit in the peer review queue and go through the formal publishing process.

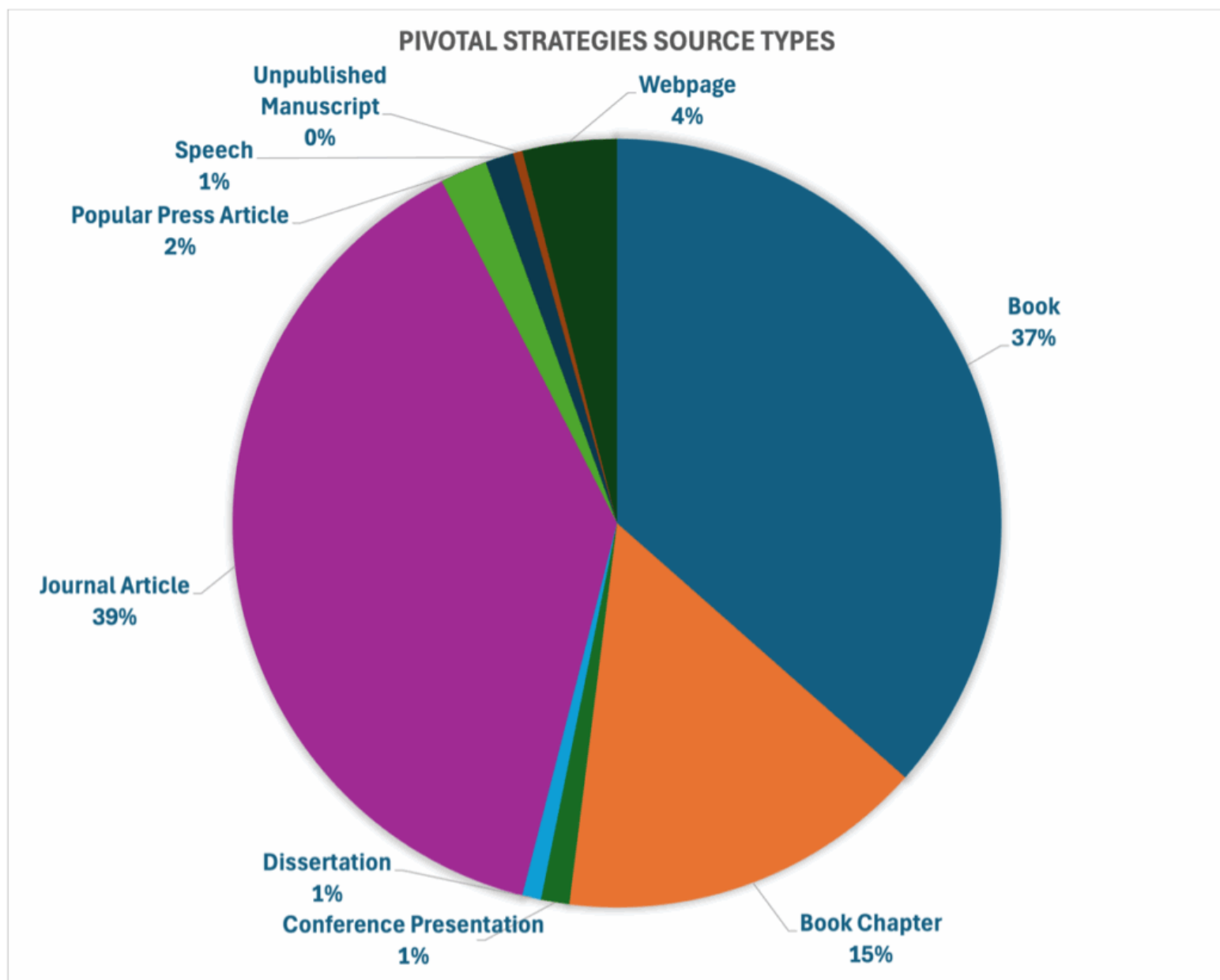


Figure 1. Pie chart showing the types of sources included in *Pivotal Strategies*.

However, as illustrated by Figure 2, the citations to journal articles are more homogenous. Nearly a quarter of all cited journal articles were published in *College Composition and Communication* (CCC). While CCC is a large, influential journal that publishes important research, it's worthwhile for collections to draw from a variety of journals to make sure a diverse cast of scholars are represented and cited. As authors, we should not only consider the diversity of the scholars we cite, but also the diversity of the scholarship form and publication venue itself. When we cite from big and small journals, subscription and open-access journals, anonymously and open peer-reviewed journals, and affiliated and independent journals, we can further solidify our commitment to centering and promoting diverse voices.

PIVOTAL STRATEGIES CITED JOURNALS

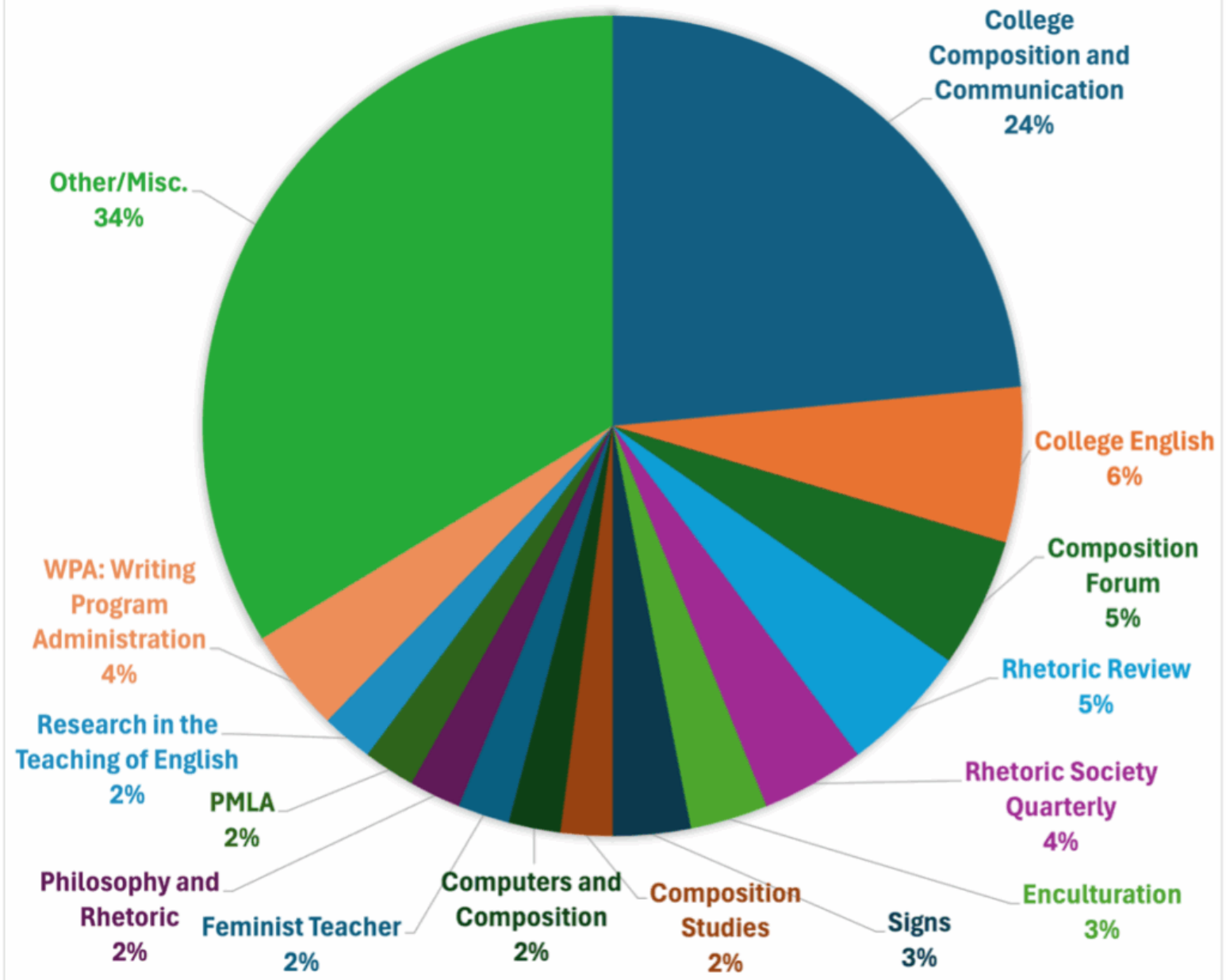


Figure 2. Pie chart showing the journals cited in *Pivotal Strategies*.

It's not always easy to say something new about writing studies in the midst of the "disciplinary turn," but *Pivotal Strategies* manages to offer readers a fresh take through simple, yet effective means: the telling of stories (Yancey 17). As a Ph.D. candidate with an M.A. in literature who was drawn to writing studies because of its commitment to pedagogy, I recognized many of the stories of financial precarity, imposter syndrome, and dueling identities within this collection. However, it was through the stories I didn't recognize that I learned the most about how writing studies is, can be, and should be claimed.

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