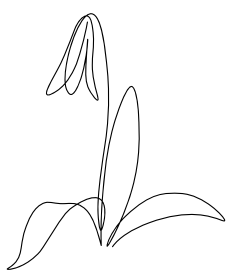
The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of several bright yellow flowers, possibly wildflowers, with green leaves and dark brown soil visible. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, with some showing prominent stamens.

RHETORICS OF OVERCOMING: a zine!

ALLISON H. HITT

The ideas in this zine are adapted from ***Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies***, a book I wrote and published with Studies in Writing and Rhetoric, an imprint of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in 2021.



I took the photos in this zine. They are all trout lilies (or fawn lilies), a wildflower native to Indiana with spotted leaves and petals that curl backwards. I take comfort in knowing that native plants return every year, maybe only for a week—spreading beauty and contributing to their local ecosystems. For me, wildflowers offer lessons in interdependence and resilience.



contents

About This Zine	4
What Are Rhetorics of Overcoming?	5
Overcoming in Disability Theory	6
Examples of Overcoming	8
Overcoming in Higher Ed & Writing Studies	10
Book Overview: Key Claims	12
Further Reading	14
References	15
Definitions	16
About Allison	18
Take Care	19



Click the text to go
to that page!

ABOUT THIS ZINE ✨

In 2021, I published an academic book titled ***Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies***. Academic books are often written with highly specialized vocabulary for specific audiences. They are also often more expensive than books written for broader audiences.

So here I am, translating the ideas of that book into a zine:

- **with plainer language,**
- **for a broader audience, and**
- **for zero cost!**

If you enjoy the ideas in this zine or want to learn more about the writing studies aspect of these arguments, I encourage you to purchase a copy of the book from NCTE or Bookshop. That said, I hope you will find this zine meaningful on its own—not as a companion piece—but as a legitimate discussion in its own right.

The green underlined terms throughout are defined in plain language at the end of the zine. Clicking terms will take you to the definition.

WHAT ARE RHETORICS OF OVERCOMING?

Rhetorics of overcoming are written, spoken, and visual arguments about disability that position it as an issue that must be overcome, cured, or eliminated.

Rhetorics of overcoming are defined by their persistence on framing disability as an individual issue that places responsibility on disabled people to adapt to society (vs. society adapting to be more accessible), as well as emphasizing diagnosis, treatment, accommodation, and cure.

In the book, I argue that **rhetorics** of overcoming manifest in higher education through a reliance on individual accommodations as the main model for disability accessibility.

In writing studies, **rhetorics** of overcoming manifest in “basic writers” **discourse** and normative theories about writing, as well as **ableist** teaching and tutoring practices that create barriers for disabled student writers that they must either overcome or risk failing a course/dropping out.



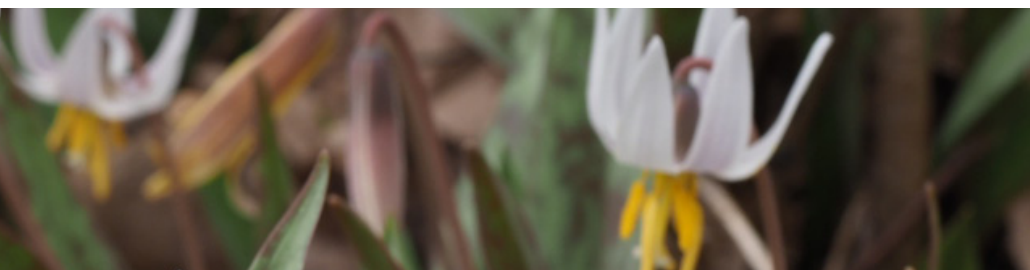
OVERCOMING IN DISABILITY THEORY

Overcoming narratives align with medical models of disability that characterize disability as a pathology or impairment.

In *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Simi Linton describes overcoming narratives as ideas “of personal triumph over a personal condition. The idea that someone can overcome a disability has not been generated within the community; it is a wish fulfillment generated from the outside. It is a demand that you will be plucky and resolute, and not let the obstacles get in your way” (18).

Many people cannot overcome their physical, mental, chronic, or intellectual disabilities, even with treatment. These discourses can be harmful because they focus only on *curing* and eliminating disability rather than *supporting* disability.

In *Disability Rhetoric*, Jay Dolmage writes that the myth of overcoming involves someone overcoming their disability through hard work or a special talent, a



“super cripp” (39). Dolmage explains that “the connection between disability and compensatory ability is intentional and required. The audience does not have to focus on the disability, or challenge the stigma that this disability entails, but instead refocuses attention toward the ‘gift’” (39–40). Here, the gift is the special talent that enables someone to overcome.

Overcoming narratives are also tied to inspiration. In a TED Talk, Stella Young talks about how inspirational images and videos of disabled people achieving *in spite of* (never because of) their disabilities is objectifying. Young acknowledges that “life as a disabled person is actually somewhat difficult. We do overcome some things. But the things that we’re overcoming are not the things that you think they are.”

Most frequently, disabled people overcome society’s limited expectations and assumptions about disability. **Disability studies** pushes back against these **ableist** narratives.

A close-up photograph of yellow flowers with dark centers, likely a species of Mimulus, serves as a background for the top section of the page.

EXAMPLES OF OVERCOMING

In Medical & Health Discourse

Overcoming narratives emerge from medical-model ideas about disability: a deficit approach that devalues disability and treats it only as a condition to be cured.

Some disabled people experience pain and challenges because of their disabilities and seek treatment. The distinction here is the ableist idea that disability can *only* ever be negative and *must* be cured.

Rhetorics of overcoming manifest in many medical contexts:

- prenatal testing and genetic screening
- applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy
- cochlear implants

Mental health and wellness discourse often argues that, with a positive mindset or enough yoga or meditation, disabled people can transcend their current embodiments and “cure” themselves.



In Media

Many disability studies scholars, including Beth Haller, have illustrated how ableism manifests in media representations of disability in the news, on TV, and in movies.

When disabled characters are featured on TV or films, they are often framed as

1. objects of pity, or
2. objects of inspiration.

This second framing reinforces rhetorics of overcoming when characters heroically will themselves to walk, positively think their way out of a panic attack, or beat the odds of a life-threatening prognosis.

Overcoming narratives are everywhere, from videos on social media of children hearing for the first time to news articles about disabled student athletes scoring the winning point. They reinforce the importance of fitting in to normative (nondisabled) expectations about behavior, communication, and social practices.

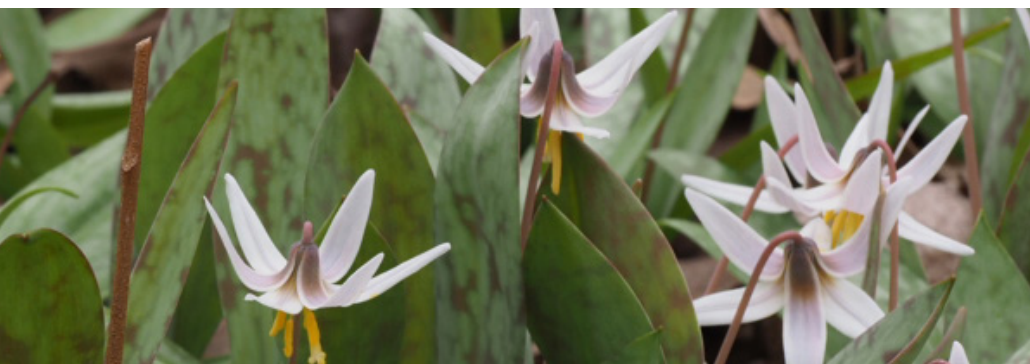


OVERCOMING IN HIGHER ED & WRITING STUDIES

As a former disabled college student and currently disabled college professor, I *constantly* observe how higher education was designed not just for the most physically able (take note of the number of accessible entrances and bathrooms next time you're on a college campus) but also the most cognitively and mentally able.

In her essay collection on mental health in higher education, Katie Rose Guest Pryal notes that mental illness disclosures are high stakes for academics working in environments that are “often still devoted to the mythos of the good human speaking well, the professor as bastion of reason” (8).

Similarly, in *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, Jay Dolmage argues that “the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness” (3).



The main model for accessibility in higher ed—*individual accommodations that are granted only to students with documented disabilities*—adopts a **social model** approach but still requires disabled students to be responsible for equitable access to course content. This approach requires instructors to make minor adaptations but never to **universally design** classroom spaces or instruction.

Rhetorics of overcoming manifest in all academic disciplines. In **writing studies**, they manifest in “basic writers” **discourse**, research rooted in **medical-model** views of disability, and inaccessible curricular design. **Writing studies** is dedicated to supporting student writers with different composing processes and language practices. In the book, I argue that these values make **writing studies** a prime space to challenge **ableist** narratives about disability and disabled student writers.



BOOK OVERVIEW: KEY CLAIMS

Chapter 1 ✨

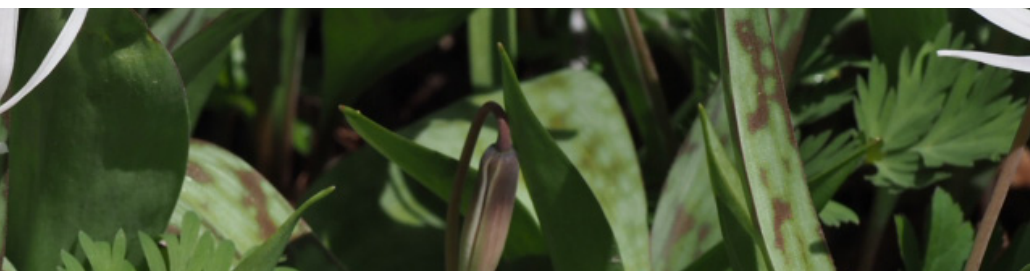
In the introductory chapter, I define rhethorics of overcoming, providing examples in cultural contexts, as well as in higher education more broadly. I also disclose my own relationships to disability.

Chapter 2 ✨

In the second chapter, I address different “waves” of disability scholarship in the academic discipline of writing studies. I highlight issues with how the field has theorized disability and accessibility, as well as brainstorm teaching practices that 1) prioritize and welcome disability experiences in the writing process and 2) are universally designed.

Chapter 3 ✨

In the third chapter, I focus on scholarship and best practices in writing center studies. Like Chapter 2, I address ableist attitudes and practices toward disabled student



writers, as well as highlight multimodal and universally designed tutoring practices to reach a wider range of student writers while resisting impairment-specific tutoring approaches.

Chapter 4 ✨

In the fourth chapter, I theorize practices that are usually only perceived as accommodations—adding alt text and image descriptions to images, captioning videos, and transcribing audio—as rhetorical and creative processes. With the rise of multimodal projects in writing classes, I argue that accessible composing practices are integral to ethical composing.

Chapter 5 ✨

I conclude with a call for a greater “ethics of accessibility” (Yergeau et al.) in writing studies. I argue that higher education more broadly needs to adopt disability justice approaches to accessibility that are interdependent, collective, and sustainable.

FURTHER READING

If you want to learn more about the overcoming narrative, I recommend these:

- Allison Harper Hitt. *Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies*. NCTE, 2021.
- Angel Love Miles. "Demystifying the Overcoming Narrative: A Black Disabled Woman's Road to the Professoriate." *Including Disability*, no. 1, 2022, pp. 37–50.
- Tara Wood. "Overcoming Rhetoric: Forced Disclosure and the Colonizing Ethic of Evaluating Personal Essays." *Open Words: Access and English Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 38-52.

If you want to learn more about **disability justice**, I recommend these:

- Mia Mingus, *Leaving Evidence*, leavingevidence.wordpress.com/
- Margaret Price. "In Service of: Thoughts on Claiming Disability Justice." *Disability Visibility Project*, 2024, disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2024/06/01/in-service-of-thoughts-on-claiming-disability-justice/
- Sins Invalid: sinsinvalid.org/news-1

References

Jay Timothy Dolmage. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. University of Michigan Press, 2017.

Open access copy on press website!

---. *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse University Press, 2014.

Beth A. Haller. *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media*. The Avocado Press, 2010.

Simi Linton. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press, 1998.

Katie Rose Guest Pryal. *Life of the Mind Interrupted: Essays on Mental Health and Disability in Higher Education*. Blue Crow Publishing, 2017.

M. Remi Yergeau, et al. "Multimodality in Motion: Disability & Kairotic Spaces." *Kairos*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2013, kairos.technorhetoric.net/18.1/coverweb/yergeau-et-al/.

Stella Young. "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much." *TED Talks*, 2014, www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much.



DEFINITIONS

ableism: beliefs and practices that discriminate (intentionally or not) against disability and disabled people

disability studies: an interdisciplinary academic discipline focused on the study of disability in the context of culture, politics, art, literature, and activism

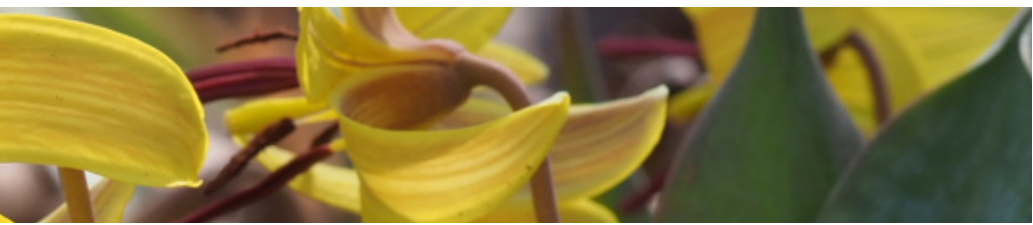
discourse: written or spoken communication

medical model: this model of disability emphasizes impairment and diagnosing, treating, and curing/overcoming disability; deficit model

multimodality: the practice of combining multiple modes of communication: textual, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial

overcoming narrative: the idea that disabled people need to overcome their disability in order to succeed or fit in

rhetoric: the study of language, usually focused on persuasive writing and



speaking; also extends to visual and embodied forms of meaning-making

social model: instead of pointing to disability as the problem, this model identifies social and spatial barriers as problems that deny equitable access

super cripp: a stereotypical figure who heroically overcomes their disability

universal design (UD): a spatial theory developed by architect Ronald Mace that built environments must be as accessible to the widest range of people possible

universal design for learning (UDL): an educational theory for increasing the accessibility of teaching and learning by designing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression

writing studies: an academic discipline focused on the study of writing; includes rhetorical studies, composition studies, writing center studies, and technical & professional communication

ABOUT ALLISON



Allison H. Hitt, she/her

I'm a writing professor at Ball State University. I write about disability advocacy and accessibility.

I earned bachelor degrees in English and Spanish, a master's degree in Professional Writing and Editing, and a PhD in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric.

I live with several mental and chronic illnesses that influence how I understand and orient to disability. These disabilities also impact my approach to teaching and working with college students.

If you'd like to learn more about my research or teaching, visit allisonhitt.com.

TAKE CARE ✨

Dear readers,

I hope you gained something by engaging with this zine—whether that’s knowledge or validation about the inherent worth of yourself and your disability experience(s).

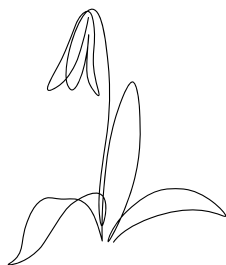
If you enjoyed this zine, share it! Email it, or print on both sides to create a booklet-style zine using 5 sheets of standard-sized paper.

If you want a more comprehensive discussion of the ideas in this zine, I encourage you to read my book!

A key idea in ***Rhetorics of Overcoming*** is that accessibility is not the responsibility of one individual. Collaborate with the people in your communities to design accessible physical and social environments. Seek out multiple disabled perspectives, *listen* to them, and *learn* from them.

Take care,

Allison H. Hitt



ALLISON H. HITT 2024