

**University of Connecticut First-Year Writing Program's
21st Annual Conference on the Teaching of Writing (CTW)
“Wicked Reading for Wicked Problems”**

April 23-24, 2026

With Dr. Kendall Gerdes

Author of *Sensitive Rhetorics: Academic Freedom and Campus Activism* (2024),
winner of CCCC 2025 Outstanding Book Award.

A [2023 report by UNESCO](#) (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) describes a global trend in approaches to education that respond to a pressing question: With ever-evolving situations of technological change, globalization, demographic shift, and climate emergency, **how do we prepare students for the future if we don't know what competencies are going to be needed?** No exception to this trend, UConn has responded to looming crises with a new Common Curriculum structured around a similar set of inquiry areas and competencies. Writing instructors are familiar with what it means to teach these new competencies or “future skills”: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, complex problem solving, and digital literacy.

Now, in the first year of the Common Curriculum's implementation, First-Year Writing aims to move this conversation forward by seeking further frameworks for engaging with crisis and broadening strategies to support students' responses. Two frameworks that interest us are Wicked Problems and polycrisis. We understand “Wicked Problems” as questions that invite dissensus and invoke a variety of responses because they are not easy to answer and may not even elicit resolution. Wicked problems are chock-full of interdependent factors, incomplete information, and unsettled definitions. Meanwhile, polycrisis describes a climate where “disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part” ([Global Risks Report](#) 9). Polycrisis prioritizes students' explorations of the interanimating dynamics of multiple issues, even crises, while also opening up multiple avenues of response.

Two strategies for teaching under these frameworks include “Wicked Reading” and teaching for “sensitive rhetorics” (Gerdes, 2024). We develop the term “wicked reading” as a strategy to respond to the wickedness which “derives from the fact that [Wicked Problems] are not the tame problems solvable through greater command of more information” (Marback 399). Therefore, “Wicked Reading” might describe teaching that foregrounds students' integration of multiple reading strategies to create novel ways of responding to emergent situations. An instructor might likewise approach (poly)crisis through sensitive rhetorics, where sensitivity acts “as the condition of possibility for language to both injure, wound, or harm, and to affect rhetorical existents in the first place” (Gerdes 5).

We invite you to join us and our **Keynote Speaker Dr. Kendall Gerdes** in thinking about the role of (writing) education and the heightened stakes of academic freedom in a time of emergent crises. **We seek proposals of 250 to 300 words** for accessible and active presentations.

We strongly encourage proposals that describe how material will be interactive, participatory, and/or engaging for the audience. Presentations and sessions should be designed to be accessible from the outset. Proposals may take the following forms:

- Research presentations: Propose an individual presentation or fully formed session. Proposals for fully formed sessions should include a brief description and all individual proposals.
- Teaching workshops: Propose to lead a one-hour teaching workshop on a specified topic. All conference attendees will have the opportunity later to sign up for accepted workshops.
- Research Slam: A free-flowing, participatory session made up of interactive digital exhibitions, posters, skill and resource shares, engaged play, and other alternative formats for sharing research, teaching, or creative practice.

Please submit your proposals [here](#). Deadline to submit is January 30, 2026.

Participants might consider proposals that deepen, extend, or complicate these and similar ideas, amongst others:

Crisis and Wicked Problems in the Classroom:

- How do we invite students into the questions of a course and hand over the responsibility of investigating those “wicked problems”?
- How do we encourage students to consider perspectives or ideologies outside of their common experiences?
- How do we address students’ anxieties and fears with confronting “wicked” problems?
- How might the frameworks of “wicked problems” and “wicked reading” impose upon and reshape students’ writing identities?
- How does writing mediate wicked problems?
- What is the role of creativity and creative writing in helping students investigate wicked problems?
- How do we encourage students to incorporate disparate knowledge into their own rhetorical stances on crises that intersect and overlap?
- How can we support student writers as problem solvers while also remaining critical of the ways they are hailed as managers of crisis?

The Stakes of Academic Freedom:

- What is at stake for secondary classroom educators when working within frameworks of “wicked problems” and “polycrises”?
- How does the writing classroom handle questions and anxieties around academic freedom?

Students as Readers:

- How do literacy crises—both real and imagined—that begin in the earliest stages of formal education complicate efforts to get students to see themselves as writers who are capable of responding to complex problems?

- How do we foster student engagement with reading as administrators, instructors, mentors, and instructional designers?
- How do we foster engagement with texts that encourage either competing or complicated answers?
- How do we encourage student autonomy in investigating their own approaches to engagement with reading?
- How do we prepare students to read with wicked problems in mind when those problems involve incommensurate interpretive frames?
- How do texts implicate their readers?