

On Academic Writing and Discourse Communities: A Primer

Articles in chemistry journals have a style very different from those in sociology journals, and both differ from articles in English literature journals. These differences go well beyond the obvious differences in subject matter. They include what counts as an appropriate organizational strategy, as legitimate evidence for assertions, as an appropriate voice and tone, and as valid and necessary ways of referring to previously published work. It is not the case that writing in one field is "better" or "worse" than writing in other fields. Rather, it is the case that each field has evolved its own discourse conventions, which reflect their differing histories, epistemologies, and ethoi. Conventions may overlap from field to field; experimental research as published in psychology, for example, resembles, broadly, experimental research as published in biology. However, conventions differ from discipline to discipline across the university, and these differences reveal different assumptions about how knowledge is created and transmitted. The university is thus a coalition of many discourse communities.

Viewed broadly, a discourse community is a group of people bound by a common interest (i.e. physicists, English professors, investment bankers) who communicate through mutually-approved (implicitly if not explicitly) forums (i.e. *Physics Reports*, *College English*, *The Wall Street Journal*). A forum is a "place of publication" (i.e. journals, periodicals, professional meetings, other places where members communicate). Each discourse community has characteristic writing conventions. Conventions are topics and rhetorical strategies recognized as appropriate by the discourse community. These include acceptable subjects; the community's episteme and ethos; what constitutes "evidence," "validity," and "proof"; and what constitutes acceptable methods of organization and development, as well as perhaps more obvious matters of style and format: length, bibliographic method, manuscript mechanics, syntax, and so on. To summarize, then, discourse communities vary in terms of

- Source materials (primary or secondary readings; written artifacts; measurements; observations, etc.)
- Treatment of sources (lengthy summary and discussion, quick citation, etc.)
- Citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.)
- Voice; representation of narrator ("present" in the text, effaced from the text)
- Conventional structures (set elements and order; implied elements)
- What counts as evidence or proof (facts, examples, testimonials, quotations, interpretations, etc.)
- Purpose (document procedures; record; explain; argue; etc.)

The Origins and Evolution of Academic Discourse Communities

Although it is possible to trace the notion of discourse communities back to Aristotle's treatment of audience, the most appropriate place to begin this particular discussion is the development of discourse communities within the American academy. David R. Russell, in *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History*, provides an overview. Prior to the 1870s, and the adoption of the German research model for universities, the academy was a single discourse community. There was a standard curriculum, professors were to a larger extent generalists, and knowledge was primarily transmitted, debated, and examined orally. Furthermore, homogeneity in gender, social class, and values defined the students—who came from less than one per cent of the population (Russell 20). These common features permitted a focus on the aim of education as leadership, a uniform course of study, and a relatively "universalized" set of discourse characteristics.

Beginning in the 1870s, several factors converged to fracture this monolith. Industrialization led to the development of new professions, a situation which resulted in establishment of new systems of higher education, such as land-grant colleges, trade, technical, and normal schools. Partly in response to this expansion and partly because of the creation of new areas of knowledge, the academy began to separate into discrete disciplines and areas of specialization. In addition, enrollment swelled—tripling as a percentage of the population between 1900 and 1925 alone (25). These increases in enrollment served to fracture the homogeneity of the student population. The new elective curriculum,

introduced in the late 1800s, prepared students for professions in a new industrial society and all but eliminated the uniform course of study.

The development of writing and publishing technologies provided an easy medium of communication for the newly specialized and increasingly geographically dispersed professionals and academics. Specific areas of interest or fields of activities provided cohesion and coherence for these groups, and interactions became conventionalized in writing. Professional societies developed, increasing in specialization through the twentieth century, and with them developed journals and other written modes of communication. In this manner, as Susan Miller argues, writing for a particular group or within a field of knowledge became "a way of thinking, not just a way of preserving thinking for speech" (qtd. in Russell 5). These writings manifest themselves as different academic genres, as Amy Devitt persuasively notes.

The development of specialized and discrete text-based academic discourse communities altered the structure of the university. However, writing was still viewed in the academy as a general skill separate from the knowledges and assumptions of these disciplinary communities. Complaints about "bad" student writing abounded; Berlin and others have extensively documented committee reports at Harvard and Yale decrying the state of student writing abilities—among the best and brightest in America in a distant halcyon age. But, as Russell argues, "The complaints rarely addressed the central issue; standards of literacy were no longer stable; they were rising and, more importantly multiplying" (22).

In other words, with the rise of specialization--and specialized discourse--within the university, students were being expected to learn not a single "educated" writing, but multiple writing styles. But the extent to which this was true--and the implications for the teaching of writing--were not fully understood until the 1970's.

Instead, the academy's solution to the "problem" of student writing was to rely more heavily on generalized writing courses. Whereas a student at Harvard in the mid-19th century would have studied rhetoric for four years, it became increasingly common to reduce four years of writing and speaking instruction to a single semester or two of coursework--and then call the course "remedial!" The shift to freshman composition helped divorce "content learning" from writing. This approach failed to examine systematically the shifting conditions of knowledge production in the academy. It clung to the fiction of a single academic community and a naive view of language as the reporting of objective reality, a stance which resulted in an emphasis on mechanical skills in the writing classroom. The dominance of a perspective in which, as James Berlin notes, "truth is to be discovered outside the rhetorical enterprise . . . through the method, usually the scientific method, of the appropriate discipline or, as in poetry and oratory, through genius" (qtd. in Russell 11), masked an understanding of the rhetorical construction of individual disciplines.

Since discourse became increasingly compartmentalized in discrete communities within the academy, this naive view of the nature of discourse continued. It permitted an increase in the production of knowledges for which there was little impetus to disseminate beyond disciplinary confines. The task of dissemination is difficult and granted low status within the academy (Take for example the dismissive tag, "popularizer," attached to scientists like Carl Sagan.) The task of sharing knowledges with those beyond a specific discipline takes time away from the "real work" of that specialization. Furthermore, the effort to converge separate, often competing or contradictory symbolic universes often proves to be extremely difficult.

As indicated above, today academia is a single discourse community only in a broad sense. For the most part, languages and epistemologies have become discipline-specific, diminishing the possibilities for shared linguistic forms. New knowledge is created and disseminated through the disciplines or in the professional or business-world adjuncts to those disciplines. Within this context, then, the recurrent dream of a singular academic language and its corollary, the newly reunited academy, must be modified. Specialization is the productive foundation of the academy and the source of the creation of knowledge itself.

Assumptions about How Students Learn Discourse Conventions

Writing in a discipline requires acquiring what Carolyn Miller calls "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (qtd. in Russell 12). However, most academic communities tend to regard teaching these typified actions as marginal to the primary task of transmitting knowledge. As a result, learning to write in an academic discipline becomes a tacit process, one achieved through a gradual acculturation and absorption of unarticulated conventions.

Within the local context of the discourse community, then, the initiate tacitly learns the activities of the community and "the issues it addresses, the purposes it serves, the concrete objects it manipulates, the questions it has excluded or already answered to the satisfaction of the community, the things that can be left unsaid because of the community's history and activity, or the things that might be said to accomplish its objectives" (Bazerman). Most initiates learn to read the conventions of the community unconsciously, without even realizing they **are** conventions. As a way of speaking becomes familiar, it appears natural. (Manifestations of this are professors' frustrations when students fail to do something that, to them, is "obvious;" others are when professors assume that the way "we" write [as English professors or psychology professors or whatever] makes sense and that other disciplines' discourses are jargon-ridden, unclear, or otherwise inferior.) Thus, as the new professional becomes ever more socialized into a discourse community, she perceives the tenets of the discipline as transparent. As Russell judges, ". . . unless spurred by external pressures, disciplines have not found it necessary to examine, much less improve, the ways students are initiated into their respective symbolic universes" (25).

Expert writers and novice writers differ not only in terms of their experiences but in terms of the range and depth of writing strategies and repertoires they have internalized. Consider some factors that influence how (and how easily) writers produce a specific text:

- Knowledge of the subject.
- Ability to acquire new or additional knowledge on the subject (library research, direct observation, empirical study, experimentation, interview, etc.)
- Familiarity with the genre, including the degree to which genre conventions are deeply internalized or known tacitly.
- Ability to learn new genres.
- Experience working within the physical/social constraints of the task (amount of time available, working alone or with others, setting for the writing— for example, in class or office vs. at home—and so on)
- Past experiences and general fluency with writing.
- General knowledge of a range of topics and subject matters (among other things, influences ability to draw connections, develop examples, devise metaphors, etc.)
- Repertory of rhetorical strategies (invention, arrangement, style, etc.).
- Facility with the technologies of writing, from handwriting ability to wordprocessing, to html formatting
- Editing and proofreading skills, ability to produce conventional standard edited American English.
- Relationship to the target reading audience. For example, do readers know more than the writer on a particular subject (this is the difficult situation in which students generally write), or does the writer know more than the reader (which has the advantage of performing from authority but the challenge of translating that knowledge into an intelligible form).

As you can see, several elements determine how easily and well a writer succeeds in a given task. Almost all have a strong experiential basis. That is, most of the knowledge and skills are developed tacitly over time, through continual practice and repetition, as writers develop a complex repertory on which they can draw in new situations.

Teaching Academic Discourse Conventions: Options and Responsibilities

Since the mid 1960's there has been a dramatic rethinking of what writing is and how it should be taught. Three pertinent perspectives evolved. First, was an understanding that the act of writing is not merely a means of reporting knowledge; it is also a means of creating knowledge. Second, was an understanding that while there are many general principles common to various writing situations, what counts as good writing changes from context to context, so that students must, in effect, learn a number of writing dialects. Third, as a consequence of the first two, researchers and teachers recognized that writing should be a component of courses throughout the curriculum.

It is crucial to recognize that academic discourse is but one type of writing that educated students must learn to produce. There are myriad discourse communities beyond the academy, as the four broad types of writing discussed on page 7 suggest.

In the 1970's, faculty in a number of disciplines recognized that writing has dimensions in addition to testing or communicating knowledge. Writing is also a mode of learning, as a seminal article by Janet Emig explained. In response, a number of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs emerged. Their goal was to enhance students' active learning in various content courses by having them write about course materials. Numerous pedagogical strategies emerged to help faculty assign and deal with student writing in courses that were not designed to permit much writing (usually by virtue of large enrollments per section). Writing is thus emphasized as a teaching tool, and the development of student writing abilities is a secondary, side benefit. WAC programs continue to be prominent in the majority of institutions across the country.

A later developing phase of WAC was Writing in the Disciplines (WID). Whereas the former emphasizes writing to learn, the latter equally emphasizes understanding and practicing discourse conventions pertinent to given academic disciplines. More attention is given to rhetorical and stylistic matters, usually in smaller majors courses. Such courses have, as part of their goals, helping students communicate as members of the discourse community do. Faculty help students analyze writing strategies and conventions, and they interact in the production of texts, often reading drafts and inviting revision.

Three Cautions about Exclusively Focusing on Academic Discourse

1. The danger of reification. Peter Elbow, Joseph Harris and a host of other scholars have warned against teaching academic discourse conventions in a way that reifies them. Research shows that discourse communities are more malleable and permeable entities than we might assume them to be. Well-intentioned efforts to identify explicit rules for producing various discourses have the effect of mis-representing them as more fixed and less complex than they actually are. One consequence is that students thus form a false sense of an academic discourse, perhaps even a parodic one. The university must be a site of innovation, not merely reproduction of a reductive status quo. Pedagogies of academic discourse must always contain a critical component that fosters innovation.

2. Overestimating the need for academic discourse outside the academy. Following graduation, English majors do not need to be able to write articles for *PMLA*. Physics undergraduates do not need to be able to publish in *Physics Reports*. Most strongly disciplinary discourse has as its domain the academy itself, and its readers are usually faculty or researchers with graduate-level training. As a result, to have the production of academic discourse as the primary goal of an undergraduate education in writing is to heighten the perceived split between higher education and "the real world." This is not to say learning to analyze and produce academic discourse is a waste of time; on the contrary, students benefit from the discipline of thinking through various rhetorical conventions, and the principles they learn about the relationship between context and language forms are translatable to other types of writing they will do. Further, it could be argued that an educated citizenry is one that understands issues and ideas presented through traditions

beyond general, popular discourse. However, students in the academy must master types of writing in addition to narrow academic discourses.

3. The neglect of public discourse. Over 15 years ago, in "The Age of Social Transformation," Peter Drucker wrote that formally educated knowledge-workers will emerge as the dominant group in the United States. Knowledge-workers are "people who have learned how to learn and who will continue to learn, especially by formal education throughout his or her lifetime" (66-7). According to Drucker, knowledge-workers possess highly specialized knowledges (emphasis on the plural). He notes that "the shift from knowledge to knowledges offers tremendous opportunities to the individual... but it also presents a great many new problems and challenges. It demands for the first time in history that people with knowledge take responsibility for making themselves understood by people who do not have the same knowledge base" (68). Drucker's exploration serves as an example of the outside forces which with increasing frequency press the academy for change. In this case, there is a call to take responsibility for dissemination across multiple knowledge bases.

Academic discourse communities are only one category of discourse communities. There is a much larger and more complex realm of public and political discourse. Both for their own success and for the betterment of society, college graduates must be able to write for those public audiences, not only to transmit information but also to argue positions. Teaching these kinds of rhetorical strategies is a crucial responsibility of WRIT 1122. Partly in response to the recent widespread emphasis on academic discourse within the broad field of composition studies, there is a strong movement to reassert the place of public discourse as a vital focus of writing instruction within the academy. Doing so revives the tradition since Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintillian of learning to communicate on public issues.

Works Cited

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