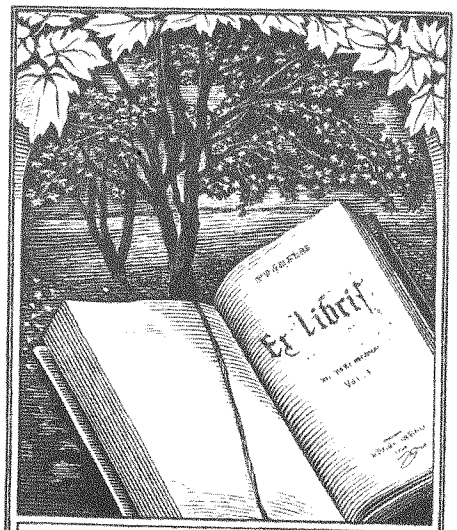

ENGAGED WRITERS AND DYNAMIC DISCIPLINES

Research on the Academic Writing Life

Chris Thaiss
Terry Myers Zawacki

2006

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE

Boynton/Cook
HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

We believe that these varied sources of data, described in detail later in this chapter, give us a rich view of faculty and student attitudes toward and practices around academic writing, a view that offers what we see as a more balanced, contextual, dynamic view of academic discourse.

What Is Academic Writing? What Are Its Standards?

"Academic writing" is one of those terms that is often invoked, usually solemnly, as if everyone agreed on its meaning, and so is used imprecisely yet almost always for what the user regards as a precise purpose; e.g., commonly by teachers in explaining what they want from students. For our purposes as researchers, we'll define "academic writing" broadly as any writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university in the United States. For most teachers, the term implies student writing in response to an academic assignment, or professional writing that trained "academics"—teachers and researchers—do for publications read and conferences attended by other academics. In this second sense, "academic writing" may be related to other kinds of writing that educated people do, such as "writing for the workplace," but there are many kinds of workplace writing that would rarely be considered "academic"; indeed, as the research by Dias et al indicates, the distinctions in audience and purpose between academic writing by students and writing for the workplace greatly outweigh any perceived similarities. The distinction is important, because the teacher who is assigned to prepare students for the kinds of assignments they're likely to receive in other classes should distinguish between the characteristics of truly academic writing and characteristics of writing in other venues.

Most textbooks used in introductory composition classes either attempt to define or imply a definition of academic writing, but most of these definitions are abstract and are not based in research. These writers may or may not consider differences in standards and expectations among disciplines and among teachers. Some texts do attempt the somewhat easier—but still problematic—task of defining standards and characteristics of writing in particular "disciplines" or groups of disciplines, e.g., writing in the "social sciences," but these do not bring us closer to a workable definition of academic writing as a whole.

Further, scholarly writers with an interest in "alternatives" to supposed standards and conventions in academic writing will invoke it in various ways, thereby assuming a definition. A few of these writers have attempted explicit definitions—for example, Patricia Bizzell in her introductory essay in *ALT DIS*. As opposed to a careful statement such as Bizzell's, most of what a student is likely to receive about academic writing, especially in the informal atmosphere of the classroom, relies too much on a teacher's limited personal experience of

particular classrooms or on commonplaces that have been passed down. For example, one common assertion about academic prose—"It avoids the use of the first person"—continues to be made in classroom after classroom, even though many teachers across disciplines routinely accept first-person writing, and journals in every field accept articles with more or less use of the first person.

There are exceptions to almost every principle an analyst can identify as a characteristic of academic writing. So what can we say with confidence about its characteristics, regardless of differences among disciplines and individual teachers? Our reading, observation, and research suggest the following:

1. *Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.*

   The concept of the discipline—and of "discipline" without the "the"—is central to the university, because academics have learned so much respect for the difficulty of learning anything sufficiently deeply so that "new knowledge" can be contributed. What the academy hates is the dilettante, the person who flits whimsically from subject to subject, as momentary interests occupy him or her, and who assumes the qualifications—merely because of that interest—to pronounce on that subject of the moment. Whether they are reading student papers or evaluating journal articles, academics are invariably harsh toward any student or scholar who hasn't done the background reading, who isn't prepared to talk formally or off the cuff about the subject of the writing, and whose writing doesn't show careful attention to the objects of study and reflective thought about them. Of course, standards for fellow professionals and for introductory students differ monumentally, but even the most neophyte student will be penalized for shallow reading and for lack of careful thinking about the subject. Persistent, disciplined study can be shown as well in a personal narrative as in a lab report, so this first characteristic of academic writing is not restricted in style or voice, although disciplines and subfields of disciplines do vary in customary ways of thought and in traditional modes of expression. We'll address in more detail later in this chapter the concept of "the discipline" and will describe disciplinary variations in subsequent chapters when we report the responses of our informants.

2. *The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.*

   "And I wonder anew at a discipline that asks its participants to dedicate their lives to its expansion, but that requires a kind of imperial objectivity, a gaze that sees but rarely feels"

   Malea Powell, "Listening to Ghosts" (16)

In the Western academic tradition, the writer is an intellectual, a thinker, a user of reason. This identity doesn't mean that emotions or sensual stimuli are absent from academic writing: indeed, the natural sciences have always depended on acute sensate awareness, detection of subtle differences in appearance, fragrance, flavor, texture, sound, movement; moreover, the arts and humanities would not exist without the scholar's intense and highly articulated sensual appreciation. As for emotion, every discipline recognizes at the very least the importance of *passion* in the ability to dedicate oneself to research, acknowledged as often tedious. But in the academic universe the senses and emotions must always be subject to *control by reason.* Political thinkers, for example, may be motivated by their passion for a system of government, even by their anger at opponents, but the discipline of political science demands, as do all disciplines, that *writing* about these issues reveals the writer as a careful, fair student and analyst of competing positions. The sociologist may describe in passionate detail personal experience of poverty or family dislocation, but the *academic* writer must not stop with the appeal to emotion (what Aristotle called *pathos*); the responsible sociologist must step back, as it were, almost as if he or she were a separate person, and place that emotional, highly sensual experience in a *context* of the relevant experiences of others and of the history of academic analysis of the topic. The literary or art historian, to cite one more example, might write about, and describe in great sensual detail, work that was intended by its creators to be pornographic, but the academic writer must be able both to appreciate the sensual power of the work and step back from the sensations to evaluate the work rationally.

With students, perhaps the most common instruction by teachers in regard to the control by reason of emotion is to avoid "impressionism": merely expressing "feelings" or opinions. The various formulations of the principles of the "personal essay" (e.g., Newkirk, Heilker), a popular assignment in composition classes, all countenance the telling of "personal experience" narratives that include the expression of emotion, but all demand of the writer an analytical persona that reflects on and evaluates the narrative in some way. The "discipline" of which we speak is largely this ongoing process by which scholars learn through practice to cultivate both emotion and the senses and, necessarily, to subjugate them to reason. It's not coincidental that "discipline" has been associated so often in education with, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, "mortification of the flesh," the scourging of the body that is an extreme form of the subjugation of the senses to reason that is basic to all academic discipline.

3. *An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.*

The academic writer may wish also to arouse the emotions to agreement or to sympathy, as well as to stimulate the senses to an enhanced perception, but the academic writer wants above all to inspire the intelligent reader's respect for his or her analytical ability. The writer imagines the reader looking for possible flaws in logic or interpretation, for possible gaps in research and observation, and so tries to anticipate the cool reader's objections and address them. When an analyst such as Bizzell, in the essay mentioned earlier, calls the writer's "persona" "argumentative, favoring debate," we should understand "argument" not as an explicit form; after all, there is much academic writing that appears benignly descriptive, not "argumentative" in the formal sense. But all academic writing is "argumentative" in its perception of a reader who may object or disagree—e.g., the teacher who may take off "points" or the fellow scholar who may sit on a review panel; the writer's effort to anticipate and allay these potential objections is also part of the broadly "argumentative" ethos.

While the three "standards" we have described for academic writing might appear simple, they are devilishly hard to teach and even to observe in any given piece of writing. Would that the standards were as straightforward as "avoid the first person" or "use correct English" or "have a clear thesis." As our findings chapters will describe in detail, our informants tended to speak vaguely about what they regarded as "standards" and "conventions" in their fields, even though none of them had any hesitancy to say that they knew what the standards were. What their stories imply to us is that their knowledge of standards accrued over time, through coursework, reading, attempts to write and reactions to that writing; through regular talk with fellow students and fellow researchers and teachers. It's no wonder, given this gradual trajectory of initiation, that newcomers to academia, such as undergraduate students, often feel that teachers' reactions to their writing are mysterious, perhaps motivated by social and personality differences, rather than by factors clearly attributable to academic quality. (One of our student findings, as we'll describe in Chapter Four, is their perception of teacher standards as idiosyncratic and unpredictable.) But, as we will discuss in the next section, perceptions of academic quality often have a great deal to do with social—and cultural—differences among writers and their readers, not only with actual analytical and rhetorical control of a person's writing. In the next section, we make a distinction between an alternative text that is acceptable to academic readers and one that is unacceptable

unless or until it is somehow revised through negotiation between writer and teacher.

What Constitutes an Alternative to Academic Writing?

We suggested three features we can confidently say characterize academic writing: disciplined and persistent inquiry, control of sensation and emotion by reason, and an imagined reader who is likewise rational and informed. Can the same confident assertions be made about the characteristics of alternatives to academic writing? Here, we think, we're on much more slippery ground, as the following anecdote from one of our informants illustrates. "My goodness, aren't I daring," anthropology professor Roger Lancaster told us he remembered thinking when he had finished writing *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua.* The book is comprised of journalistic and impressionistic passages, raw field notes, chapter-length interviews, life histories, newspaper articles, and letters. In the book he also discloses his sexual orientation and describes his partnership with a military man opposing the Sandinistas: he questions whether his research will be compromised by this relationship. The collage-like quality of the book and the self-disclosure were both very different—"daring"—approaches for him; he felt he had created a truly alternative text. Yet, when he reread the book a year or so later, he recalled this reaction: "Oh my god, it's a standard ethnography." For us, Lancaster's shifting perceptions about his work illustrate the difficulties of talking about alternatives and academic writing. When academics talk about writing alternatively, often they mean they are including what has previously been excluded—voices, structures, styles, formats, genres, personal information. Still, they are writing for other academics, in an academic forum, and, if they are being published and read, are no doubt displaying the features we described above.

Though he was experimenting with new forms and with—what might be considered by some—risky self-disclosure, Lancaster's book certainly demonstrated these features. The variety of material he includes both broadens and deepens a reader's understanding of the culture. His disclosure that he is homosexual occurs in the context of his work in the field and in his analysis of the larger issues around homosexuality in Nicaragua. When he first perceived his work as "daring," he may have been most uncertain about how his imagined readers—anthropologists—would respond. Yet anthropology's tradition of stylistic experimentation—from Malinowski on—no doubt reassured Lancaster that his "daring" work would still provoke a reasoned response from academic readers, who had already been constructed by the discipline as readers who readily accepted "alternative" texts as long as those

texts were still performing disciplined academic work. The fact that his book is now required reading in some introductory anthropology courses seems to confirm Lancaster's changed perception of the book as "standard" ethnography, not particularly alternative in this discipline.

Just as arguments and advice about "academic writing" are often based on assumed meanings, so too are arguments about "alternative" discourses. In these arguments, certain kinds of texts (and voices) are labeled "alternative" because they do not conform to some analysts' expectations for standard academic writing. Because they do not conform, the argument proceeds, they are marginalized and/or go unheard. But, as the example of Lancaster's book illustrates, an alternative text may be widely accepted if the writer conveys to the reader a conscious awareness that he or she is constructing a different kind of text and if the reason for using an alternative form is clear. Lancaster, for example, described to us the "organic relationship" between a text and its writer; he needed an alternative form, he said, "to mirror the discombobulation of a failed revolution." As we will show in our research, professional academics often find that alternative forms and methodologies can perform rigorous and disciplined inquiry at the same time that they may uncover knowledge not available through more traditional discourses.

An "alternative" may also be employed for political purposes in order to call attention to those voices that have historically been marginalized or silenced by dominant discourses, as, most notably, feminist and African American scholars have done. In her essay "Recomposing as a Woman—An Essay in Different Voices," for example, Terry joined a conversation among feminists that had been in progress for a number of years, as the title indicates in its echo of two landmark publications; that is, if women do think, write, and speak in voices different from men, then their different voices should be as valued as the patriarchal voices that had been dominating academic discourse. Terry purposely claimed a marginalized space by using an alternative style and format to suggest what a "woman's voice" might sound like if she wrote according to the characteristics being theorized by "difference" feminists. While the essay was intended to show that genre and gender are both socially constructed categories, Terry also argued that women should not have to speak from the margins of their discipline if they happen to write in ways not generally recognized by disciplinary insiders. Her readers—other academics—are expected not only to follow the logic of the argument but also to see that it is possible to reason in this alternative form.

But what about those writers, typically our student writers, who are not aware that the texts they are producing are linguistically and/or culturally quite different from traditional academic writing? Take, for example, a paper, written by one of our students, a young man from Sierra Leone. The student

spends the first half of his paper, the topic of which is the political turmoil in his country, describing the beauty of the country and its people. There is no introduction and no thesis related to the ostensible topic; he instead conveys in heartbreaking detail his longing for the land he'd left behind. It is not until well into the third page of an eight-page paper that he begins, with no transition, to describe the strife in neighboring countries. Around page 7, he mentions—almost casually—that this strife endangered his own country. Then he returns to a description of the country and concludes the paper. While this student seems to be unaware that he is writing from a different cultural paradigm, one that values indirection and subtle implication, he may also have had good reason to fear writing in a more direct style. In other words, he may have been quite conscious of constructing an alternative text for the readers he is imagining, readers who may be very different from the "coolly rational" academic readers Terry imagines in her essay.

How will an academic reader—say, a professor in the student's major—receive the Sierra Leone essay? In *Listening to the World*, Helen Fox is concerned with the misunderstandings and misreadings that occur when teachers are confronted with these kinds of culturally different texts. She, along with many others, argues that western academics reject these texts because of the radical disjunction between "the dominant communication style and world view of the U.S. university" (xxi) and that of the writer who produces a text which seems "obscure, or digressive, or overly descriptive, or disturbingly unoriginal" (126). These writers—especially since they are students—may be perceived to lack the discipline and control expected in standard academic writing in the western tradition and so the argument will be dismissed. Yet, interestingly, our political science informant told us she would not automatically reject the Sierra Leone paper nor ask the student to take out the descriptions of his country; rather, she would ask him to include a statement of purpose to help focus his intentions for the reader. Her response indicates a degree of openness to a nontraditional text, but, while she is accepting much of the student's work on its own terms, she is also demanding revisions that will make the text more familiar to traditional (western) academic readers. We cannot assume, then, that teachers will reject nontraditional forms as long as they can relatively easily be made to fit within the three principles we have identified.

While many readers/teachers may be open to culturally alternative texts, there's another kind of disjunction between a writer and reader that we haven't yet addressed, that is, the disjunction caused by texts that are what we might call "syntactically diverse." It's often postulated that among the flaws the "coolly rational" academic reader will most strongly object to is "incorrect" usage of the grapholect (in this case, SEAE). Certainly composition programs

and standardized tests that place primary emphasis on syntactic and mechanical correctness illustrate this assumption about academic readers. Within our schema of standards in academic writing, this emphasis would fit as follows: the academic reader objects to flawed use of the grapholect as evidence of lack of control by reason, perhaps also evidence of superficial preparation and lack of attention to the published literature. This projected reader is embodied in the stereotyped professor (of which there are, of course, some outspoken examples) who loudly complains, "Why, they can't even use commas correctly!"

However, as our anecdote about the assessment workshop at the beginning of the chapter illustrates, it is easy to overestimate the importance to the academic reader of the student's adherence to syntactic and mechanical "correctness." In other words, academic readers may indeed accept in student writing some amount of error in use of the grapholect as an allowed alternative to academic prose. There are several reasons to believe that academic readers may be more tolerant of these kinds of "error" than the stereotype suggests. First, the scholarly community is increasingly international, and conscientious readers of all nations need to develop an ability to read across dialects and linguistic blendings. As one of our research informants, a mathematician, noted in reference to the international community of math scholars, the structure of articles in math is sufficiently uniform across the international community so that one can understand much of the argument in an article written in a language one doesn't understand. Because of (1) the customary sequence of sections and (2) the use of symbolic language, the content of the argument, or "proof," should be clear. Moreover, the growth of English as a lingua franca provides a different kind of example of acceptable diversity. As English continues to spread in international influence, there has developed a range of "Englishes" that differ in aspects of syntax, and certainly of lexicon. Each has its own "correct" features. The differences between the British and American grapholects are one instance of this divergence.

Second, as American schools have accommodated more and more students and faculty of diverse linguistic backgrounds, the variety of acceptable Englishes grows. In a highly linguistically diverse university such as ours, it would not be practical or productive to place primary and equal emphasis on all aspects of SEAE as a "standard" of academic writing (though one of our informants from economics insists on such a standard). The standards described above indicate that students must be sufficiently fluent in a language, regardless of dialect, to carry out the logical operations that show reasoned control; but some of the most common "errors" made, for example, by those who are learning SEAE—e.g., lack of agreement in number between subject and verb or idiomatic use of articles—often don't affect the logic of

sentences. The same is true of so-called "nonstandard" dialects of American English (e.g., Black English Vernacular).

In Chapters Two and Three, we will briefly return to this issue of "syntactic diversity" within academic writing, reporting what our faculty informants said about their expectations regarding student "correctness" and the results from our assessment workshops.

The foregoing discussion of various alternatives suggests a possible taxonomy of alternatives that can help writers/analysts speak more specifically about what they are seeing when they categorize a piece of writing as alternative to "standard" academic writing:

- *Alternative formats*, as exemplified in Lancaster's *Life Is Hard*, with its use of journalism, field notes, interviews, letters, autobiographical detail, etc.; these may also include unconventional layouts and typography; shifting margins; overlapping text and text boxes; creative use of sentence and paragraph structure.
- *Alternative ways of conceptualizing and arranging academic arguments*, as exemplified by the paper written by the student from Sierra Leone.
- *Alternative syntaxes (language and dialect differences)*, which we have characterized as varying in their acceptance by academic readers.
- *Alternative methodologies*, which entail experimenting with methods and ways of thinking outside one's disciplinary tradition.
- *Alternative media* (email, hypertext, blogs, digitized text and images, video), which we recognize as having the potential to change utterly the way "academic writing" gets written and read.

We recognize that these categories overlap and encompass each other in many complicated and interesting ways and also that other scholars might configure them differently depending upon their research interests and political agendas. If we try to categorize the literature on alternative discourse according to this taxonomy, for example, we can quickly see how many categories a particular piece of writing might fill depending upon the writers' motives, the effects they want to achieve, and their sense of the stakes involved in writing alternatively.

Thus far in this chapter we've attempted to define "academic writing" as broadly as possible in order to suggest that the term is not so narrow as is often theorized in the literature. Similarly, we've explored a taxonomy of alternative models that given readers might or might not accept as legitimate options within their conceptions of "academic writing." We and our informants have much more to say about these alternatives in the following chapters.

We have not included in our taxonomy of alternatives to academic writing thus far an alternative strategy that is almost never accepted as "academic writing": when an academic chooses to write about his or her disciplinary specialty for a nonacademic audience. This alternative is definitely not academic writing because the decisions that writers make for the nonacademic reader typically run counter to the overt complexity and the impersonality demanded by the academy. While it is sometimes possible for a single work to appeal to both the academic and the popular audiences, the distinctions are often so basic that these occurrences are rare. In the next chapter on our faculty's professional writing, we discuss informants who do this kind of writing even though they recognize that such work risks not being taken seriously; nevertheless, they consider it important for political advocacy and community education. Further, as we will discuss in Chapter Three, many of our informants, even those who do not do this kind of writing themselves, give undergraduates assignments that require them to connect what they are learning in the major with their own experiences and/or topics in the popular media and to write about these for audiences outside of the academy.

Disciplines, Genres, and Research on Alternative Discourses and the Academy

We can't proceed to the description and analysis of our research findings without first defining other key terms and summarizing the research that has led us to our particular takes on them. Therefore, in this section, we probe the key concepts "discipline," "genre," and "alternative discourse." By way of clarifying these terms, we look at three research areas—writing in the disciplines (WID), feminist theory and critical pedagogy, and contrastive rhetoric. Our review of work in these areas also illuminates the theoretical bases of our own study.

Discipline

We'll begin with a discussion of the term "discipline", which, in WID research, is most often used as synonymous with "such fluctuating administrative expediencies" as "the departments" or "the majors" (Thaiss, "Theory" 314). Hence, most WID studies give names such as "history," "chemical engineering," and "landscape architecture" to the rhetorical setting for the research. As we will show, and as Chris and others have argued, disciplines are much more fluid and elusive than the programmatic names suggest. So too are academic genres, which arise from the shared aims of disciplinary discourse communities, but which also give rise to and shape those communities.