A History and Continuum of Written English Registers, Fields, and Genres

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Abstract: This article traces the history of college writing and suggests a different way ahead. To show why we need this approach, the article historicizes the start of postsecondary English as a paradoxical one, committed to egalitarian ideals while privileging narrow and exclusive English usage. To offer an alternative approach, the article synthesizes empirical linguistics and writing research in a continuum of written English. The continuum includes five things all writing does—connection, cohesion, detail, stance, and usage—on a sliding scale of interpersonal to informational linguistic patterns. To illustrate a continuum approach, the article maps authentic writing samples from informal internet writing to published formal writing on the continuum. This mapping poses questions at the nexus of writing and history of English studies, questions that help us interrogate the history and implications for registers, genres, and lexico-grammatical patterns rewarded and left out of higher education.

A Paradox

Before the 18th century, postsecondary language study in England focused on classical languages, a pursuit most available to students from families with private language tutors. The subsequent establishment of college English study in England and the United States was nominally more egalitarian. More students had access to English than to Latin and Greek; English was more practical and less socially exclusive.

Egalitarian as it was in theory, this curricular shift was hierarchical in practice. Only a small set of usage preferences were considered worthy of study, and written English variation was maligned (Eggington & Wren, 1997). The 18th and 19th century calls for postsecondary English were radical, in other words, but the English called for was not.

Then and since, the English of most U.S. higher education has been limited and homogenous (Lynch, 2009; Perryman-Clark, 2016; Smitherman, 1999; Curzan, 2009), as seen in textbooks and usage guides discussed in this special issue. In this way, schools and universities regularly normalized language discrimination and unequal access to opportunity (Lippi-Green, 1997; Smitherman, 2017), as well as little preparation for diverse written Englishes in the real world (Pigg & Berger, 2020; Cogo & Dewey, 2012, p. 18). Alternative approaches in higher education include critical awareness of language ideologies and lexico-grammatical knowledge of diverse written Englishes, but these are more the exception than the rule (Young, 2011; McCambridge, 2015; Shapiro, 2022; L. L. Aull, 2023).

Meanwhile, outside of schools and tests, written English continues to be tenaciously, productively diverse, showing a much wider range of discourse patterns than what is generally represented as school English. Actual written English continues to be guided not by narrow, prescriptive usage preferences but by diverse usage norms (Curzan, 2009; Baker-Bell, 2020; Pitzl, 2018; Cogo,

2008). Actual written English represents a full continuum of authentic uses in a range of communicative contexts, not a hierarchy topped by only some usage preferences that have been privileged in schools since the 18th century (L. L. Aull, 2024).

The story of how we arrived where we are, and an instructional alternative focused on patterns and variation across genres, fields, and registers, is the focus of this article. First, the article traces three early figures to historicize the paradox and homogeneity embedded in the establishment of postsecondary English study. Then, it presents a writing continuum of writing tendencies and patterns that illuminate productive similarities and distinctions across written English registers, genres, and fields. Conceptualizing and analyzing writing this way, the article suggests, means exploring diverse writing patterns rather than regulating a narrow version of written English, and learning much more about language in the process.

English Goes to College

The slow shift to postsecondary English study began in the 18th century. Buoyed by the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, groups in Scotland, England, and North America began reforming education in light of practical and nationalist ideals. By the 1730s, universities in Scotland offered English courses; by the mid-18th century, English Dissenters broke from the Oxbridge tradition and offered English courses as well.[1] By the late 18th century, Scotland's John Witherspoon promoted English study in U.S. university curricula as president of Princeton, a shift welcomed by North American Puritans (suspicious of classical pagan writers and their threat to Christian scripture) and prominent 18th-century U.S. thinkers who advocated for English prominence and for elective study only of other languages (Reinhold, 1968; Logan, 1979).

Still, revolutionary as it was to call for English, the approach to English was not revolutionary. It was one kind of writing only. Radical reform brought English to universities, but it brought narrow English writing criteria, too.

Three 18th-century figures who called for educational reform illustrate this paradox. Joseph Priestley, English scientist and tutor in Languages and Belles Lettres at Warrington Academy, was a famous figure from the Dissenting Academy tradition, known for his progressive ideas about religion, politics, and schooling (Miller, 1990, p. 52). George Campbell, Scottish rhetorician and author of the widely read *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, was embedded in the new philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment (Ulman, 1990, p. 72). Benjamin Franklin, a U.S. diplomat considered a national founding father, was known for promoting non-elitist education, the basis for his promotion of English instead of Latin study (Bell, 1955).

All three of these figures were known for novel ideas about education in the 18th century and appeared to believe in access to education regardless of economic background. All three, too, expressed hierarchical views of English usage. Priestley expressed mixed views, evoking the more descriptive idea that usage preferences stemmed from "the general prevailing custom" (Priestley 1762, p. 184) but also suggesting that standard English usage preferences were established due to their "superior excellence" (Priestley 1762, p. 179).[2] Priestley's curricular advice was for students to write dialogues and themes and for teachers to "correct their bad English" (qtd. in Miller, 1990). Campbell (1776), for his part, evoked a strict language caste system in which those in "the lower walks of life" misapplied the English language of "superiors." He recommended they "renounce their own [usage] immediately" (p. 347). Franklin, meanwhile, made clear his concern that immigrants would "never adopt our Language or Customs," and insisted school leaders be "correct pure Speaker(s) and Writer(s) of the English Tongue" (qtd. In Bell, 1955, p. 2; emphasis his).

These leaders promoted these ideas at a significant time, a time of nation-building and postsecondary educational expansion in the United Kingdom and the United States. Priestley's lectures were used in universities on both continents (Schofield, 2004, p. 259). Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* was widely used as an English composition textbook and inspiration for US

writing instruction (Berlin, 1984; Connors, 1986), and his recommendations for English usage were taken up as established rules (Murray, 1795; Miller, 1997). And Benjamin Franklin's *Proposals relating to the education of youth in Pensilvania* directly influenced the founding and curriculum of the University of Pennsylvania.

Where we are Today

This paradox—commitments to inclusive educational change alongside exclusive forms of English—lingers still. Like Preistley, Campbell, and Franklin, many university educators today espouse diversity but not necessarily linguistic diversity. Even as postsecondary students are increasingly multilingual and multidialectal, and new usage norms such as those from English as a lingua franca grow across the world (Smit, 2017), only some written Englishes continue to count in accessing postsecondary study in English (Lobeck, 2019). The Princeton Review tells college application essay writers that "Colleges Do Notice Grammar Mistakes" and links to the article "Admissions officers reveal the worst college essay grammar mistakes," all of which are based on writing in a formal register using standardized English usage preferences (and several of which relate to wording and conventions rather than grammar).[3] Many standardized assessments continue to tie postsecondary admission to a narrow version of written English and are furthermore timed, essentially ensuring that those most practiced at quickly writing formal, standardized English will be successful.

For the US college writing placement test Accuplacer, for instance, you might have one hour to "Write an essay for a classroom instructor in which you take a position on whether participation in organized school athletics should be required," and according to Accuplacer's test tips, you should follow the conventions espoused by grammar and spell check apps, which tend to be based on formal, prescriptive usage (Curzan, 2014). The argumentative essayistic genre furthermore means that this assessment will probably value overtly persuasive linguistic features like boosters (e.g., *really, clearly*), active verb constructions (*they wrote* versus *was written by*), and some uses of the first person focused on text-internal argument (*I will argue that*) (L. L. Aull, 2017). In other examples: for a U.K. GSCE English Language exam, you might have 40 minutes to respond to the task, "'Young people do not participate in enough sport.' Write a letter for your local newspaper, giving your opinion on this statement," and your writing will then be judged based on whether it "uses Standard English consistently and appropriately with secure control of complex grammatical structures." And for a Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English (CAE), you might have an hour and a half to write an essay about whether museums, sports centres, or public gardens should receive money from local authorities, and you should do so in a "formal tone."[4] These examples entail timed, individual tasks without time for collaboration, revision, or digressions, and they suggest that writing in a formal register following standardized usage preferences still dominates since postsecondary English study began.

Once students enter college study, they are more likely to find authors from diverse backgrounds on their syllabus reading lists than in the past, but they are unlikely to see diverse English welcome in their writing assignments (Weaver, 2020; Perryman-Clark, 2016). Indeed, they are even unlikely to encounter tasks that are common outside of college courses, including collaborative writing (Pigg & Berger, 2020). Articles in *Inside Higher Education* in 2018 and the *Economist* in 2021 insist that "We Must Help Students Master Standard English" and that universities "Don't ditch standard English. Teach it better." Conventional writing assignments and views like these continue to reinforce the idea that greater equality comes not from everyone learning more diverse English usage but everyone learning one kind of English.
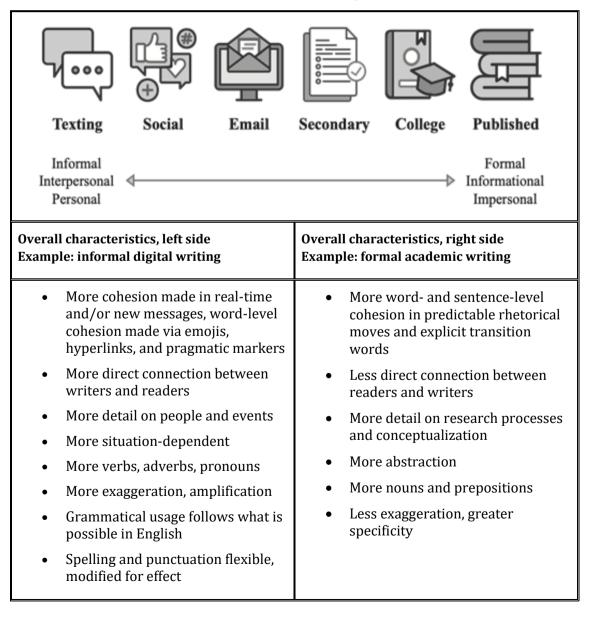
A Continuum of Written English Registers and Genres

All of this is to say: A great deal of written English knowledge has been left out of the central story of postsecondary education. Left out is interpersonal writing emphasizing familiarity and

informality. Left out is informal writing and other varieties with more flexibility than standardized usage preferences. Often left out is iterative and collaborative writing. Yet it is diverse writing practices like these that characterize writing in the daily lives of most adults transitioning into or beyond English-medium postsecondary writing. Whether or not they have conscious knowledge of diverse written English, it surrounds them, and they use it.

This is another paradoxical layer, then: postsecondary written English usually does not approximate written English outside of it. Post secondary written English does vary, across fields and genres, as discussed more below (Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Sancho Guinda, 2012; Swales, 1990). But it also contains significant patterns associated with formal academic discourse that distinguish it from other writing (Biber & Gray, 2016). Indeed, corpus linguistic research documents a range of overlapping and distinct patterns across different registers, genres, and fields commonly encountered by students pursuing postsecondary education, such as informal text messages, professional emails, and formal college papers. In Table 1, I've represented several documented linguistic patterns on a basic and fluid continuum of registers and genres, which I discuss more below.

Table 1: Basic Written English Continuum of Register and Genre Patterns (Adapted from L. L. Aull, 2024)

| Texting | Social | Email | Secondary | College | Published |

Informal Interpersonal Personal ⟵⟶ Formal Informational Impersonal

Overall characteristics, left side Example: informal digital writing	Overall characteristics, right side Example: formal academic writing
• More cohesion made in real-time and/or new messages, word-level cohesion made via emojis, hyperlinks, and pragmatic markers • More direct connection between writers and readers • More detail on people and events • More situation-dependent • More verbs, adverbs, pronouns • More exaggeration, amplification • Grammatical usage follows what is possible in English • Spelling and punctuation flexible, modified for effect	• More word- and sentence-level cohesion in predictable rhetorical moves and explicit transition words • Less direct connection between readers and writers • More detail on research processes and conceptualization • More abstraction • More nouns and prepositions • Less exaggeration, greater specificity

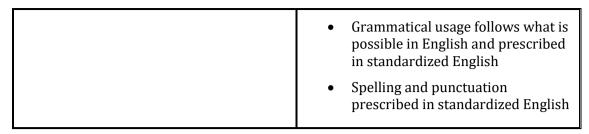|	• Grammatical usage follows what is possible in English and prescribed in standardized English • Spelling and punctuation prescribed in standardized English

Table 1 shows a continuum of diverse patterns in written English and intimates that written English across registers and genres also shares five tendencies: cohesion, connection, detail, stance, and usage. In other words, written English across registers and genres finds ways to indicate a new topic or turn in some way (cohesion), draw some attention to readers and writers (connection), exhibit topics and priorities (detail), convey attitude and certainty (stance), and follow lexicogrammatical and conventional norms (usage). These five tendencies allow us to understand and be understood in a range of writing situations. Meanwhile, a sliding continuum of personal, informal, interpersonal, impersonal, formal, and informational linguistic patterns allows us to achieve these tendencies while writing within different relationships, tasks, and genres (L. L. Aull, 2024).

For instance, to achieve cohesion in informal digital writing, writers use emojis, new messages and reactions to show turn-taking, while the pace of turns also follows norms vis-a-vis communicating enthusiasm (Tannen, 2013). To achieve cohesion in more informational writing, writers use conjunctives in legal and policy documents (Trebits, 2009), introductory moves in academic research articles (Swales, 1990), and transition words or code glosses in student writing (L. L. Aull & Lancaster, 2014).

To achieve connection, or to draw attention to themselves and engage with readers, writers likewise use patterns which range from more to less personal. First-person pronouns, for example, are used across the writing continuum, but differently. In more interpersonal writing, writers regularly use first-person pronouns in "text external" ways, meaning they emphasize personal experiences and reactions in the "real world" (e.g., *I'm going home; we went to the store*) (Ädel, 2006; L. L. Aull, 2020). In more impersonal writing, writers tend to use first person pronouns in "text internal" ways, meaning they detail information in the unfolding text or research (e.g., *I'm sho not trying to say here; We will show that*).

Written English also indicates detail in lexical and grammatical ways that vary across the continuum. Interpersonal patterns include more simple subjects and objects emphasizing people and events, while more impersonal patterns include more nominalizations and noun phrases with premodifying nouns and embedded prepositional phrases, focused on ideas and processes (Biber & Gray, 2016). An overall result of these patterns is that the left side of the continuum is characterized by more clausal elaboration showing explicit grammatical relationships, while the right side of the continuum is marked by more compressed, phrasal elaboration with less explicit grammatical relationships, making the latter harder to parse for novice readers (Biber & Gray, 2010). Indeed, corpus research shows that as postsecondary students write more, they begin to shift from more clausal to more phrasal elaboration (Staples et al., 2016) and that nominal density may be even more pronounced in English as a lingua franca (ELF) academic writing (Wu et al., 2020).

In terms of stance, written English includes a range of patterns that show caution, certainty, and attitude, which help convey varying degrees of commitment as well as politeness (Hyland, 2005). More personal, digital writing between peers might express high levels of certainty and generality in features like repeated vowels or capital letters (e.g., *TOTALLLLLLY*), for example (Heath, 2018). By contrast, much impersonal writing on the continuum shows balanced levels of hedging and boosting (Hyland, 2005) and is unlikely to use unqualified generality markers like *always* or *everyone* (L. L. Aull et. al, 2017).

Finally, written English includes a range of usage patterns across the continuum. For example, related to detail patterns emphasizing ideas and processes, impersonal patterns include more passive verbs. By contrast, writing that is neither overly personal nor overly impersonal, such as news writing, includes more phrasal verbs (Brown & Palmer, 2015). Online blogs, closer to social media, include more necessity modals (*have to*) than more formal writing (Biber & Egbert, 2018).

Across the full continuum are shared usage structures as well, such as subject-verb-object order (modified to verb-subject-object order for questions), -er morphemes to make adjectives comparative, and common morphological processes for making new words, such as blending, which, for instance, gives us the word *chillax* (chill out + relax) used more in informal patterns and the word *malware* (malicious + software) used more in formal patterns. Informal register patterns on the left of the continuum are also more flexible in their usage: they allow for more change more quickly and include more flexible norms for spelling and punctuation, for example. While this article focuses on register, genre, and fields, it is worth noting that even as dialects of English have some differing usage patterns: no dialects dwell only on one side of the continuum, since all dialects have informal and formal registers. (Likewise, there are no registers or dialects that have no grammar. All English registers and dialects follow usage norms based on what is grammatically possible and meaningful in English, and socially valued in a given context.)

In Table 2, I've represented a synthesis of these patterns, which shows shared tendencies and different patterns across a range of writing encountered by most students pursuing postsecondary education (see L. L. Aull,2024 for more detail).

Table 2: Continuum of Written English Patterns Across Registers and Genres

Continuum Tendencies	Continuum Patterns	
Cohesion	- discourse markers - emojis - conversational turn-taking, overlap - common narrative moves such as temporal organization, orientation, coda	- cohesive ties (conjunctions, transition words/phrases) - paragraph and section organization such as common introductory moves and development moves - genre organization such as intro-methods-results-discussion in

		some lab reports and research papers
Connection	• first person is text-external, focused on real world experiences (e.g., I ain't sorry; we will always remember) • second person pronouns and direct address common	• first person is text-internal (focused on text sections and unfolding ideas, e.g., I will argue; we used X materials) • rare second person address rare and text-internal (e.g., consider this; see figure 1)
Detail	• sentence subjects are simpler, such as single words or names • subjects emphasize people, personalized experiences • more active voice	• sentence subjects are often dense noun phrases • subjects emphasize ideas, phenomena, and processes • more passive voice
Stance	• more generalizations, exaggeration, and boosters • punctuation, repeating vowels, capital letters show emphasis, intonation, exclamation	• more hedges, fewer boosters, • less generalizing • punctuation breaks up phrases and sentences according to 18th and 19th century usage preferences
Usage	• spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary more flexible, able to change	• spelling rigid, standardized ~16th century • punctuation more rigid, standardized from ~18th century usage preferences
Shared Usage across Continuum	• subject-verb-object construction • open lexical categories (e.g., adjectives, nouns, which tend to welcome new words), closed lexical categories (e.g., articles, which tend not to change) • morphological rules of English	

A contemporary postsecondary student might write text messages, emails, and papers in the same day and, as Table 2 represents, all of these are likely to in some way signal new input, draw some attention to who they are by and for, emphasize particular details, share a stance toward those details, and follow usage norms of English. The student's linguistic patterns for achieving these will range depending on where they are writing on the register and genre continuum. The text messages will most likely include the most interpersonal features and flexible usage, which prioritize familiar connection and personal experiences and reactions. The student might use a new message or emoji for cohesion and repeated vowels or capital letters for stance, for instance. The papers will likely include the most informational features, emphasizing ideas and processes and inflexible capitalization and spelling norms. Students' secondary writing might likewise include more interpersonal patterns than their postsecondary writing does. Meanwhile, their

emails will likely fall somewhere in between text messages and papers, with interpersonal connection patterns and informational focus patterns.

Continuum Patterns across Fields

Written English displays a range of linguistic patterns within registers and genres as well. Within personal, informational writing, for instance, arts and humanities writing tends to be more interpersonal, with more overt stance features that show both more qualification and intensification emphasizing writers' reasoning, while natural science writing tends to foreground experimental processes and findings, showing relatively less stance and attitude overall (Hyland, 2005; Yoon & Römer, 2020). An exception is philosophy, which tends to be an outlier in these trends, with fewer hedges, more frequent boosters, and more first-person expression of opinion (Hardy & Römer, 2013; Black, 2022). Finally, social science writing tends to fall between arts and humanities and natural sciences, with more interpersonal patterns than the latter and more impersonal patterns than the former (Hyland, 2005; Nesi & Gardner, 2012).

In addition, within and across these discipline groups, academic writing patterns vary by genre and task, with argumentative essay writing being the most interpersonal and report writing being the most impersonal (Hardy & Friginal, 2016; Hyland & Guinda, 2012; Nesi & Gardner, 2018). Assignment type and conditions also lead to more and less interpersonal linguistic patterns, with more open-ended questions leading to more interpersonal stance patterns (L. L. Aull, 2015, 2017, 2019; Beck & Jeffery, 2007). Finally, introductions and conclusions in research articles and student papers seem to likewise use less informationally dense patterns in order to guide readers in and out of more specific information (Swales, 1990; Liu & Xiao, 2022; L. L. Aull, 2020).

Within text messages and emails, linguistic patterns likewise vary, according to relationships, tasks, and writing conditions, though they still exhibit more interpersonal and informal features than genres further right on the continuum. Both workplace emails and workplace chat groups appear to include regular interpersonal and informal features that prioritized relational work over communicative efficiency (Darics, 2010; Pérez-Sabater, Turney, & Montero-Fleta, 2008). Still, within these genres, familiar relationships between peers may allow more personal and interpersonal patterns, whereas hierarchical relationships such as between bosses and employees, or tutors and students, may lead to more relatively formal patterns (B. Aull, 2019; Aull & Aull, 2021).

Finally, across the continuum, the more unfamiliar, rushed, and/or stressful a writing situation is, the less bandwidth writers have for writing choices and revision. It therefore seems fair to conclude that under timed and unfamiliar writing conditions, writers will be more likely to write in the most familiar informal, interpersonal patterns they use more often in speech and writing (see, e.g., Smitherman, 1992). I have briefly captured these patterns within registers and genres in Table 3.
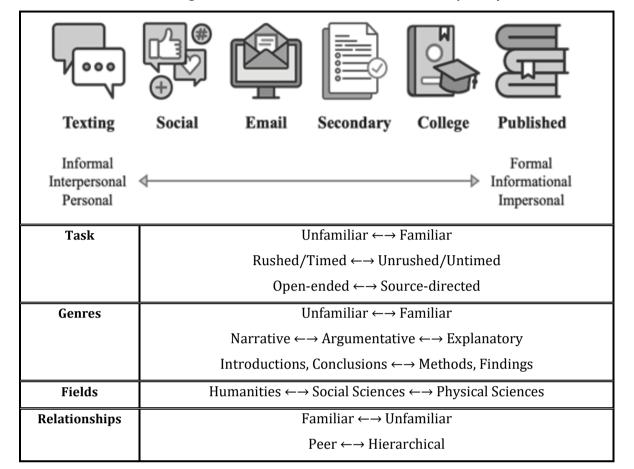
Table 3: Writing Continuum with Task, Genre, and Disciplinary Detail

Texting	Social	Email	Secondary	College	Published

Informal Interpersonal Personal ←————————————→ Formal Informational Impersonal

Task	Unfamiliar ←→ Familiar
	Rushed/Timed ←→ Unrushed/Untimed
	Open-ended ←→ Source-directed
Genres	Unfamiliar ←→ Familiar
	Narrative ←→ Argumentative ←→ Explanatory
	Introductions, Conclusions ←→ Methods, Findings
Fields	Humanities ←→ Social Sciences ←→ Physical Sciences
Relationships	Familiar ←→ Unfamiliar
	Peer ←→ Hierarchical

Of course, all of these patterns are overall discursive trends, with exceptions. But they are also trends that unite and distinguish diverse reader and writer expectations and tendencies across registers, genres, and fields. Because research indicates that explicit attention to similarities and differences across different writing situations aids writing transfer as well as students' beliefs about their ability to transfer writing knowledge to new contexts (Smith et al., 2021; Negretti, 2012; Granville & Dison, 2005), addressing continuums of patterns in this way can make existing writing knowledge more explicit and usable.

Students don't arrive at postsecondary writing with no knowledge or practice with cohesion and stance strategies, for example. But they may very well have arrived without explicit awareness of the shared tendencies and differing patterns they already use in their writing and how those might serve them in less practiced registers and genres. Furthermore, a written continuum like this emphasizes usage knowledge in more accurate and inclusive ways, both because it draws explicit attention to a range of existing writing knowledge and because it uses language patterns to drive how we describe writing, e.g., interpersonal or informational rather than "improper" or "sophisticated." Finally, because English innovation appears to start more often on the informal parts of the continuum before moving to more formal writing, exploring a written continuum across registers could help highlight language change.[5] These and other considerations are ripe for insights from history of English studies, a point to which I return in the conclusion.

Analyzing Written English across Registers, Genres, and Fields

To illustrate this continuum view, I will analyze a few contemporary examples of written English in terms of their continuum tendencies and patterns. The examples range from a Whatsapp exchange between peers on the left end of the continuum to two published academic research articles on the right end of the continuum. All of the examples are published in some way, in that

they appear within or as published writing: they appear either in an online, public-facing course, or in online writing research (and in this way have been consented for readers to access). They are also limited: most appear on U.S. and U.K. platforms and are written by writers in those contexts, excepting the email and social scientific academic article examples. Still, they reflect the register, genre, and disciplinary trends reported in research on written English discourse patterns, and they illustrate that readers and writers clearly value a certain degree of linguistic diversity no matter how narrow postsecondary written English has been historically. The seven examples are briefly represented on Table 4 and then in more detail subsequently. Though more could be said about each one, I have opted for more examples and concise analysis in service of more application.

Table 4: Writing Continuum with Examples

Continuum Tendencies	Continuum Patterns					
	Example 1 Whatsapp exchange from McKiernan 2016	Example 2 2023 Blog by Ann Handley	Example 3 Email examples from Roshid et al 2022	Example 4 Secondary student response paper from Black 2022	Example 5 College student paper from BAWE	Examples 6 & 7 Highly cited articles from social science and humanities journal articles
Cohesion	New message indicates new response	New text lines and sentences indicate new topic	New sentences indicate new topic	New paragraphs indicate topics; explicit transition words show relationship between sentences (in addition; for example)	New paragraphs indicate topics; explicit transition words show relationship between sentences	New introductory moves and explicit transition words indicate new subjects and relationship between them

Connection	Direct question and reply, laughter response	Direct, 2nd person in repeating questions; text-external first person; hyperlink	Direct 2nd person address; text-external 1st person	Text-external 1st person (my own life; my aunt)	No direct 2nd person address, 1st person collective (we rely on)	No direct address, references to scholars, text-internal first person
Detail	Short replies, simple, imagined focal subjects	Short sentences, simple subjects (My friend Paul, ChatGPT)	Simple subjects and objects sometimes implied rather than stated (e.g., [I've] Noted [that[. [I'm] Waiting for your confir-mation)	Some simple nouns (Socrates), some dense phrases (the altruistic characteristic of Socrates), some passive verbs	Research subjects (Geological surveys) and passive verbs (it has been observed), some dense noun phrases (estimates of the average northern hemisphere temperature until 1850)	Noun phrases describing debates and phenomena (the potential impacts of screen media on psychology and behavior)
Stance	Vowel repetition and capitalization for emphasis (Easyyy)	Italics for emphasis, interpersonal address assumes agree-ment (yeah?)	Few explicit stance or attitude markers	Hedge (can be related to) and boosted claim (knew not dying would create)	Regular hedges (some, might) and boosters (quite, marked)	Regular hedges (suggest, may or may not)
Usage	Verb-subject - object order for question; flexible punctu-ation and capitali-zation	Subject-verb-object order, phrases and sentences followed by punctu-ation	Subject-verb-object order, phrases and sentences followed by punctu-ation	Subject-verb-object order, phrases and sentences followed by punctuation	Subject-verb-object order, phrases and sentences followed by punctuation	Subject-verb-object order, phrases and sentences followed by punctuation

Example 1: Texting

The texting example comes from "Characterising conversation on Whatsapp: Speech-like, or not?," a University of Manchester thesis by Thomas McKiernan (2016). In the study, McKiernan finds that Whatsapp is not speech-like, due to marked differences between speech and Whatsapp. These differences include features related to stance including adjective intensification, and

features related to connection including personal reference. Example 1 on the continuum is a Whatsapp exchange between two friends.

> Participant J: Are you a robot? Here's a test
>
> Participant J: EXECUTE ORDER...
>
> Participant M: 66
>
> Participant J: Ahaha
>
> Participant M: Easyyyyyyy

In this interpersonal exchange, the text message writers follow norms common in interpersonal patterns on the continuum, including the cohesive pattern of new messages to indicate new input, connection patterns like direct address, stance patterns like capital letters for emphasis and humor, and usage norms like ending a sentence without punctuation.

Example 2: Handley Blog

The Marketing Insider Group ranked Ann Handley among the best bloggers of 2022, and at the time of writing this in July 2023, Handley's cover blog was "Why We Write: A Story About AI and a Sentient Toaster Oven."[6] The blog opens with the following two sentences: "My friend Paul shared his out-of-office email with me. ChatGPT4 had written it," followed by the AI-generated away message:

> I am out of the office attending and speaking at a series of AI conferences, where I will dive deep into the trenches of machine learning, neural networks, and sentient toaster ovens (just kidding about the last one... or am I?).

After noting this ChatGPT response, Handley muses about it, using interpersonal connection patterns to invite readers to muse with her. She starts by directing readers to look at a particular detail, then offers her stance on the detail: "Look at the wink to the audience (*"or am I?"*). That's good."

Then, using the explicit counter *but* and simple sentence subjects including first and second person pronouns, Handley directs readers to an alternative detail, the one she finds most important, and tells them why:

> But I highlighted the really important part: The reference to sentient toaster ovens.
>
> It's a joke I would have made. A clunky, dumb little toaster oven tricked out with AI is inherently funny—it's like a golf cart applying for a job as a limousine.
>
> You can imagine the ridiculousness of a Sentient Toaster Oven taken to an absurd extreme....

Handley goes on to imagine this "absurd extreme," briefly detailing the toaster oven's imagined experience, before turning back to connect with readers so they might muse with her.

> So ChatGPT is funny now?
> It writes just like me?
> And maybe like you?
> I kept thinking about it. That night, it kept me awake.
> Are you wondering why it kept me awake?
> What exactly is bugging me...?

These excerpts from Handley's blog include mid-continuum informational and interpersonal patterns. She uses a hyperlink (to her colleague Paul's page), references to ChatGPT, text-external first person, direct questions, simple subjects and details, hedges and adjectives to show stance, moderately informal usage such as an informal verb ("bugging"), and both phrases as well as full sentences between periods. Like other blogs and much online news, she uses line breaks to introduce new ideas, and question and answers to build cohesion. The spelling and capitalization patterns are otherwise more on the formal end of the continuum.

Example 3: Workplace Email

Workplace email is among the most common professional writing genres, and even as it varies depending on workplace contexts and status relationships, it blends interpersonal and informational features (Kleckner & Marshall, 2014; Abbasian & Tahririan, 2008, Skovholt et al., 2014; Aull & Aull 2021). Example emails from "English as a Business Lingua Franca: A Discursive Analysis of Business E-Mails," by Roshid, Webb, and Chowdhury (2022), show this blend in example sentences from their study of 92 email messages collected from business personnel in five businesses in Bangladesh.

Email 20, for instance, includes the formal usage patterns of a full sentence with punctuation, "Thanks for your cooperation.", while using the interpersonal direct address of the reader. Email 61 also addresses the recipient directly, using initial clausal ellipses in an example of both relatively informal and informational writing: "Noted. Waiting for your confirmation." Email 45 includes the following sentence without punctuation: "Samples sent today," and other examples include omitted words, e.g., "Yes understood" (Email 53), and interpersonal salutations, e.g., "Dear Boss" (Email 28).

Example 4: Secondary Student Response Writing in Political Philosophy

Late secondary and early postsecondary writing tends to be more informal and interpersonal, and less informational, overall than postsecondary writing, though timed and open-ended writing exercises appear more interpersonal and personal than untimed, source-directed secondary papers (L. L. Aull, 2015). Kristin Black's (2022) corpus analysis of informal response papers by secondary students in their penultimate year shows a range of expectations that included interpersonal and informational expectations, including referring to one or more course texts, as well as uses of personal evidence and applications to contemporary issues (p. 540). The course was focused on political philosophy, meaning that it is likely to include more overt stance markers than, for instance, writing at the same level in a physical science course.

The opening of the paper shows these patterns in its blend of simple focal subjects and noun phrases and its use of interpersonal connection, text-internal first-person, and moderately formal usage, including some noun phrases, multi-clause sentences, subject-verb-object sentence order, and formal spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. In the passage below, I've underlined focal nouns and noun phrases, bolded cohesion words and phrases, bolded and underlined connection patterns, and italicized stance patterns.

> Socrates knew not dying would create a burden for his family and friends who will live with Athens judging them for being the "laughingstock." This quote brings out the altruistic characteristic of Socrates. **Not only** does he think about himself and his unknown afterlife, **but** others will be still living after he gone. **In addition**, Socrates' reaction to his death sentence *can be related to **my own life***. **For example**, my aunt was diagnosed with gastric cancer in 2010. . . During her last days she told her children to stay strong and become the best *you* can be in whatever *you* choose to do. (Sarah, Seminar 2)

Secondary writing tends to include patterns to the right of blogging and email, but to the left of postsecondary writing, both because informationally dense writing is less familiar than other parts of the continuum for most writers and because secondary writing tasks tend to be more open-ended, making them more likely to include interpersonal and personal features such as text-external first-person pronouns. Given the informal response paper task represented in this example, it is likely to be even more personal and interpersonal than more formal secondary tasks, and this bears out in the references to the writer's *"own life"* and use of second-person pronouns. At the same time, the example includes the explicit cohesion patterns used in formal, informational writing "(in addition," "for example"), as well as a few dense noun phrases ("this altruistic characteristic of Socrates"). The usage patterns, including subject-verb-object order ("she told her children to stay strong") and the null (or zero) copula ("after he gone"), are grammatically possible in English across the continuum.

Example 5: Postsecondary Paper, BAWE Physical Science Meteorology Explanation 1 6114a

As the prior analysis notes, postsecondary writing tends to have more informational and impersonal patterns than secondary writing, evidenced in fewer interpersonal and personal connection patterns, fewer informal usage patterns, and more impersonal focal patterns such as more dense noun phrases and passive verbs, particularly in papers in physical sciences. This bears out in the example paper from the corpus of British Academic Written English (BAWE)[7], titled, "Global Warming: Mechanisms and Evidence." In the first body paragraph of the paper below, I've used the same annotations as the prior analysis.

> Around 18000 years ago, the earth was in its last known "ice age". Glaciers extended a long way south from the poles well into Europe and North America. The ice was several kilometres thick and covered a ***vast*** area of the globe. In present times, glaciers ***only*** account for 10% of the earth's surface. Geological surveys have found evidence to support the changing earth's climate, showing the process is both slow and continuous. **However**, in recent times it has been observed that there has been a marked increase in temperature at the earth's surface. Figure 1 shows estimates of the average northern hemisphere temperature until 1850 after which detailed observations were available to produce the data. It is ***quite*** clear on the graph that although there have been both cooler and warmer periods leading up to about 1900, post 1900 there is a ***marked*** consistent temperature increase unlike before. Experts for some time have been trying to find *some* patterns in human and natural activities that *might* have led to this increase in temperature beyond what they would see as natural fluctuations.
>
> Greenhouse gases are those which scientists believe are the *main* causes of global warming. Naturally [our] earth's atmosphere reflects *some* incoming radiation back out to space whereas other radiation can pass freely through into the atmosphere to heat the earth.

As is clear in the annotations, this example indeed includes several informational, formal, impersonal patterns. It includes explicit cohesion words, detail patterns such as subjects focused on research phenomena ("geological surveys") and passive verbs ("it has been observed"), stance patterns including both hedges ("some; might") and boosters ("vast, only"), and usage patterns including formal capitalization and punctuation. The passage also includes usage patterns used across the continuum, including subject-verb-object order and morphological rules like using -ly to indicate adverbs ("freely").

Example 6: Published Arts and Humanities Research Article

At the time of drafting this article, the featured article in this journal, *Across the Disciplines*, is one that, while transdisciplinary like this journal, focuses on arts and rhetoric, making it more likely to include patterns common in arts and humanities research articles. The article, "Exploring Embodiment through the Rhetoric of Health and Medicine: An Arts-Based, Transgenre Pedagogy," is by Kristin LaFollette, and its opening paragraphs are excerpted below. As with the previous examples, the excerpt is annotated for detail patterns in noun subjects and objects, cohesion word patterns, and stance patterns of hedges and boosters. I have also marked the three rhetorical moves commonly used to build cohesion in research article introductions (Swales, 1990).

> [Move 1] While I recognize the embodied nature of the work I do as a teacher, writer, and artist, [Move 2] embodiment is *not always* acknowledged in the academy. Despite work being done to shift this mindset, students in the writing classes I teach *frequently* resist writing like they are embodied individuals with embodied experiences. Even when they are encouraged to do so, they ask if they are allowed to use first-person point of view or if they can include stories and details about their lived experiences in their work. This uneasiness about embracing bodies is not uncommon among students who have been taught in traditional classrooms; many have been told their embodied experiences don't fit with academic writing, so they are hesitant to include them. Christina V. Cedillo (2018) calls attention to this, **as well**. She writes that, because we are taught to compose "as though communication and reception do not occur through our bodies," our experiences and perspectives are *often* devalued in the academy. **However**, acknowledging embodiment is *vital* as it presents unique opportunities for composers and "brings to the forefront experiences of specific bodies as they produce and consume meanings" (Smith et al., 2017, p. 46).

> [Move 3] Building on this notion, this article advocates for an arts-based pedagogical approach that considers embodiment through the rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM).

Example 7: Published Social Science Research Article

Our final example is the most-read article from 2022 in the American Psychological Association journals, "Like this meta-analysis: Screen media and mental health" by Christopher Ferguson et al. I have included the introductory paragraphs below, which, like example 7, includes similar cohesive move patterns. As before, the excerpt is annotated for detail patterns in noun subjects and objects, cohesion word patterns, and stance patterns of hedges and boosters.

> [Move 1] In recent years, intense debates have emerged among scholars, policymakers, and the general public regarding the *potential* impacts of screen media on psychology and behavior. [Move 2] A prominent area of debate is the extent to which screen media *may be related* to poor psychosocial functioning, such as depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation, particularly for young people. Such debates can focus on screen media generally under the *somewhat* nebulous term "screen time" or can focus on specific media such as types of social media platforms, or devices (e.g., smartphones). There is a ***substantial*** divergence of opinion on this matter. While some scholars *suggest* that screen media are a primary cause of a recent rise in teen suicide (e.g., Twenge et al., 2018, 2020), others argue that the evidence is mixed and insufficient, with effect sizes too small to illuminate clear relationships to mental health (e.g., Heffner et al., 2019; Orben & Przybykski, 2019a). **Furthermore**, other studies *suggest* that screen use, at least in some contexts, *may have* an association with positive mental health (e.g., Grieve & Watkinson, 2016; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Utz, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). This set of contradictory findings *can make* it difficult to

> parse what real effects *may or may not* exist. …[Move 3] Given inconsistencies in the
> research literature, meta-analysis *can be* an effective tool to help consolidate findings
> in this area and *help* explore discrepancies. This rationale forms the basis for the
> current article, which provides a consolidated analysis of the current state of the
> science in this field.

As the introductory paragraphs show, the two published research articles have several similar patterns. They both include some dense informational phrases with embedded prepositions and nouns. They also build cohesion similarly, with the same introductory rhetorical moves (Swales, 1990). In Move 1, the articles review a topic and research territory, a move in which the arts-focused article also notes personal experience. In Move 2, both articles note a niche in the territory–in the social science article, an unresolved debate ("here is a substantial divergence of opinion" on the matter of screen time), and in the arts article, a need for more interrogation ("our experiences and perspectives are often devalued in the academy. However, acknowledging embodiment is vital…").

Both academic articles then include move three, indicating what the article will contribute. They also both build explicit cohesion through transition words ("however"; "furthermore"), and both indicate stance through boosters ("frequently"; "substantial") and hedges ("not always"; "potential"), and they both use dense noun phrases favored in the formal, informational patterns on the continuum. Both articles, that is, are on the informational end of the continuum. Neither uses interpersonal connection such as directly addressing readers, yet the arts-focused article includes more personal markers, while the social science article includes more impersonal markers. Both article introductions include both qualifying and amplifying stance patterns. The two articles' detail patterns also seem to loosely map onto the patterns within the informational side of the continuum: while the social science article details foreground screen time and study findings, the humanities article foregrounds scholars and their reasoning (Hyland, 2005).

Responding to the Paradox

Written English has always shown the value of varied and patterned use. It has always offered fodder for analyzing a continuum of varied registers and genres. Particularly outside of schools and tests, it is ever guided by what is grammatically possible, meaningful, and in use. When we approach written English according to continuums of authentic uses, not a hierarchy topped by only some English preferences, we honor what is already true in a range of communicative contexts. And, we help build metacognitive bridges across different uses, toward informed choices about patterns to follow or not.

In this article, I've endeavored to historicize the narrow approach to written English we have in postsecondary education. I've also endeavored to map multiple registers and genres encountered by postsecondary students in a way that draws attention to what Geneva Smitherman calls the "social and linguistic rules of language": the different social contexts in which writing happens and the linguistic rules that make writing understandable and diversely responsive at the same time. These are all considerations at the nexus of writing studies and HEL studies that benefit from historical contextualization, which helps us understand how we got the social and linguistic rules we have today, including those patterns rewarded and regulated in higher education. In other words, HEL insights can help us consider questions such as: how much have genres maintained different tendencies over time, and how much change has there been among genres along this continuum of written English? How did genre and disciplinary patterns documented today begin, and what are their implications for how knowledge is organized and made (in)accessible? Have linguistic patterns across the continuum changed over time—e.g,, were there eras or contexts in which interpersonal correlated more often with formal registers (such as in genres like personal letters between professional colleagues)?

For now, this article has aimed to show that analysis of a continuum of writing can help us counter linguistic miseducation and be more prepared for writing as it exists in the world, by focusing on "what language is and allows human beings to do" (Smitherman, 2017, p. 6) rather than focusing on only one part of the continuum. Without an alternative, we are left with seemingly unresolvable conflicts between between diversity and literacy, conflicts with us since the start of postsecondary English study. Fuller continuums of shared purposes and varied patterns in written English reconcile diversity and literacy. If we can recognize and analyze its diverse patterns, we can encounter written English with less of the discriminatory censorship of the past, and with more language knowledge besides.

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Notes

[1] The Dissenters were so called because they were forced to leave the English universities by the Act of Uniformity in 1662, which required oaths to Anglicanism of all students and teachers.

[2] For a fuller discussion, see: Hodson, J. (2006). The problem of Joseph Priestley's (1733–1804) descriptivism. *Historiographia Linguistica*, *33*(1-2), 57-84.

[3] See the full articles: "Six handy grammar rules for your application" and "Admissions officers reveal the worst college essay grammar mistakes".

[4] See Accuplacer's exam candidate materials, GCSE English Language Paper Two example and tips, and CAE candidate materials.

[5] For instance, corpus research has shown that traditionally informal phrasal modal verbs (have to, got to) are increasingly used in formal, informational writing (Brown & Palmer, 2015).

[6] See the full blog post.

[7] For more detail, see the homepage of the British Academic Written English Corpus..

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