

Helping Thesis Writers to Think about Genre: What Is Prescribed, What May Be Possible

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Graduate students often feel anxious about whether their writing is as it should be—and if not, why not? (How should it be? And how can they tell, other than by pleasing or displeasing their supervisors?) At the same time, some wish to be more creative, but not to risk the success of their academic “audition.” This article discusses a WAC-like seminar that, drawing on genre studies, helps to mediate these concerns for graduate students in an Australian university. They are introduced to genre analysis and encouraged to find patterns of structure, style, or strategy in theses in their area. At the same time, they look at examples that suggest a range of possibilities for creativity. The seminar demonstrates how the “interpersonal” work of a thesis can be achieved both by adhering to convention and by diverging from it.

IF STUDENTS HAVE TO “invent the university” when they begin (Bartholomae, 1985), they must reinvent it if they progress to graduate study. They are not simply faced with a longer piece of writing for a familiar discipline; they are given much more scope for designing their project (and perhaps misshaping it), and the stakes are very high. While the project is an intellectual one, its social implications are never far from the student’s mind: a thesis is an audition, as well as a report of research. The writing will define the writer as a person worthy (or not) of membership in the discipline community. While the thesis must do what is expected of a piece of research, it should, if possible, do more. But what is expected, and what kind of “more” will be likely to go down well?

It is the supervisor's role to mediate this challenge, but a perspective from WAC can be a useful complement to a supervisor's advice. For one thing, students are often reluctant to confide their uncertainties to their supervisors. For another, the relationship can be rather claustrophobic, with a close focus on the minutiae of content; this, while important, can obscure some of the broader (and less well-defined) issues of structure and style that students are concerned about. Supervisors often find it easier to be precise about the research, which is their specialty, than about the rhetoric, which is not. WAC's focus on genre can help students to reframe "mistakes" they "don't know how to fix" as problems of fit with generic expectations that are, at least, knowable. At the same time, because disciplinary genres are also somewhat fluid, students can be encouraged to imagine choices that may not be apparent when they focus too closely on "what my supervisor wants." This article discusses a WAC-like forum in an Australian university, in which research students are introduced to an approach from genre studies that helps them to work out what is prescriptive in the expectations surrounding their thesis, but also what is possible.

The Thesis Afternoon

I call this forum "WAC-like" because, in Australia, there is no close equivalent to the WAC movement in North America. Writing is required in most disciplines, but rarely taught in any. There are, however, academic language and learning (ALL) advisers whom students can consult, and who offer classes on various aspects of writing.¹ My ALL position is located within a Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, whose students I work with at all levels from undergraduate through doctoral research. Each year, the graduate students' association at my university asks me to spend an afternoon with students in my area who want to learn what they can about "Writing Your Thesis: Humanities."

The session I offer does not aim to tell students how they should write their theses. It would be impossible to be prescriptive, or even descriptive, across the wide range of disciplines encompassed in my Faculty. These are simply too different, in too many ways, to attempt to characterise in an afternoon. (The literature on disciplinary differences is far too large to canvass here; just a few of many useful discussions include Bazerman, 1981; Giltrow, 2002; Herrington & Moran, 1992; Ivanic, 1998; Linton, Madigan, & Johnson, 1994; MacDonald, 1987; McCarthy, 1987). Nor does it seek to

¹ This function was, until recently, known by the acronym LAS (Language and Academic Skills). In 2006, a national Association for Academic Language and Learning was formed in Australia, whose discussions, resources, and refereed journal will soon be located at the Association's Web site.

describe “good writing” at a more general level; if there is such a thing—and I share Johns’ (1997, p. 34) scepticism in this regard—we must assume that research students have already shown that they can do it. What the session offers is a way of discerning the characteristics common to theses in their area, and a way of considering what makes creative variations work.

Patterns, Conventions, and Choices

Because students need the security of knowing what a thesis should look like, I suggest that they assemble several recent theses in their area and note their formats (front matter; sections; use of headings; referencing; appendices; etc.); their voices (First and/or third person? Balance and location of active and passive verbs? Author present or vacant? Lexically dense or more diffuse? Heavily nominalised, or more congruent?); and their strategies for presenting their material—on which this article will mainly focus. In alerting the students to common linguistic features of academic voice, I draw on systemic functional linguistics, especially Halliday (1985); on Booth, Colomb, and Williams (1995); and on Ivancic (1998, pp. 260–270). I alert them to some choices to be made in each of these areas, and some common patterns. In particular, I introduce them to Swales’ CARS (Creating A Research Space) model, which maps the typical introductory “moves” found in the discourse of research (Swales, 1990, p. 137 ff.). These are establishing a territory; identifying a research niche; and occupying that niche. I then tell them how to locate all the theses held in our library, in their area, to see what has been successful in recent years; and I tell them about the Australian Digital Thesis scheme (based on the work of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute), which makes theses from all over the country available online (<http://adt.caul.edu.au>). Selecting from this corpus, I suggest, they can see how and where (or even whether) Swales’ moves are enacted. They can also look at the structures and strategies that previous students have adopted.

I illustrate this sort of analysis with examples from politics, English, and anthropology. An MA student in politics, arguing that unregulated flows of migrants pose a security risk to countries both neighbouring their homeland and further away, moves geographically around the globe (Feeney, 2000). An MA student in English, arguing that Angela Carter’s fiction parallels developments in feminism, moves chronologically through both (Turner, 1994). A PhD student in anthropology, exploring the competition between Republicans and Islamists to produce a sense of cultural and political identification in the people of an urban neighbourhood of Istanbul, adopts a hybrid strategy combining literary vignettes of people and places with excursions into theory (Houston, 1999).

These examples are chosen because their commonalities and differences show both that the thesis is a conventional genre and that there is room for creativity within it. In their first few pages, all of these writers create a research space by indicating the context within which their question is a question; then, what kind of contribution their thesis will make, to what kind of discussion in their area; and towards the end of their introductory matter, they signpost how their argument is going to develop. At the same time, the second and third examples create a little excitement around the possibilities for “revoicing” the genre rather than simply “ventriloquating” it (here I draw on Ivanic [1998], who in turn draws on Bakhtin). This can be important for graduate students who feel that they are being put through their paces, and nothing more—like Rodriguez (1982) who felt, in graduate school, that he wrote nothing but sentences “that were overly cautious, timid, strained brittle under the heavy weight of footnotes and qualifications. . . . unable to dare a passionate statement. I felt drawn by professionalisms to the edge of sterility, capable of no more than pedantic, lifeless, unassailable prose” (p. 71). It would be irresponsible to encourage students in a romantic idea of individual voice, which may lead them to take risks they cannot afford. It is dispiriting, however, to treat the thesis like a glass slipper that the lumpy prose of ugly stepsisters must be trimmed to fit.

This is a problem of which genre theorists are aware, even if only to dismiss it as a problem—for, as Ivanic argues, genre theorists in fact share “a *distrust* of . . . facile . . . prescriptivism” (1998, p. 44). Swales (1990) acknowledged that a genre approach to writing risked being “associated with a disreputably formulaic way of constructing . . . particular texts . . . inimical to the enlightened and enlightening concept that language is ultimately a matter of *choice*” (p. 33). However, he offers his models not as templates but as examples that show features characteristic of a genre of academic writing which, if not explained, can remain opaque to students even while they strive to learn it. “Once you can show me that you both understand and can operate the standard (and safe) way,” he tells students, “you are free to carry on in another way if you like, especially if the other ways suit your individual intellectual character or your perceptions of your particular writing situation” (Swales, 1990, p. 12).

A Range of Examples

When I offer the “thesis writing” session, I have to acknowledge that it is not easy—either for students or for an observer like myself—to tell how much any example may owe to “individual intellectual character,” and how much to the “particular writing situation.” For example, in the politics thesis we examine, the presentation is straightforward and

the language plain and unadorned. The summary moves, in a single paragraph, from the context and problem—“Throughout East Asia, there is growing concern about the unregulated movement of people. The level of refugees and illegal migrant workers has increased significantly since the 1970s”—to the thesis statement: “It is the contention of this thesis that illegal migration and refugee movements in East Asia affect not only the security concerns of regional countries, but also the security environments of countries further afield such as the United States and Australia” (Feeney, 2000, p. 1).

The English thesis, by contrast, is rather gimmicky, but in ways that work. First of all, we encounter a striking photograph of Carter with much of her face in shadow, her eyes hidden by large, reflecting glasses, and her expression indecipherable. On the facing page, this is juxtaposed with an uncontextualised quotation from Nietzsche, which is not about Angela Carter, obviously, but contains a phrase the student wants to suggest is an apt description of her subject:

“The madly thoughtless shattering and dismantling of all foundations, their dissolution into a continual evolving that flows ceaselessly away, . . . let it cheer us by looking at it in the glittering magic mirror of a philosophical parodist in whose head the age has come to an ironical awareness of itself” (quoted in Turner, 1994, front matter).

Only after these unconventional “moves” does the writer present her conventional summary, followed by an introduction that gradually reveals the reasons for the quotation and the photograph. We see the point of the quotation when, in the summary, we read the thesis statement, that the “overall argument is that Carter is a self-conscious critic of the dominant ideology” (Turner, 1994, p. ii). Then, in her introduction, the student hopes to persuade us that Carter was enigmatic, and her fiction likewise: “The photograph of Angela Carter illustrates the indeterminacy of meaning that is an inherent feature of much of her work” (p. 2). She then quotes her subject seemingly endorsing this approach, as Carter says “I . . . leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions” (Carter, 1983, p. 69). Next, the student recruits support from the critical literature, quoting Catherine Belsey’s (1988, p. 91) view that “the position of the ‘author’ inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory”. By these means, the student has constructed a springboard for an interpretation that, she seems to feel, may be a little risky: “Given leave by Carter to make my own meanings in regard to her work” (p. 3), the student embarks upon her project, with the unreadable visage of Angela Carter seeming to say, at every turn, “Maybe she’s right and maybe she’s wrong—I’m not saying.”

This student has indulged herself in some creative ways of setting up her subject as a writer of elusive and indeterminate meaning. But is this because she is a creative student, or because English is a creative discipline, one that approves of “play”? The students know, as I do, that creative style is rarely welcomed in academic writing; they smile ruefully when I share with them a comment received by a student of James and McInnes (2002): “Writing is not a rapturous activity . . . When it comes to thesis writing you must resist being carried on a poetic swirl.”

Nonetheless, in the first few pages of the anthropology thesis, we find this “poetic swirl” sandwiched between a formal, theoretical summary and a first-person introduction to the project:

Prologue

Republic Day, 29 October 1994, Istanbul.

Flags filing into Taksim Square. Flags teeming on the flagpoles outside the 5-star hotels. Flags draped over the balconies of offices, flags promenading down the boulevards. Shaking the hands of children sitting on fathers’ shoulders, swishing over heads like snappy red butterflies. Abseiling down the face of the Ataturk Cultural Centre. Crawling out along the arm of the giant crane, swinging fearless as acrobats high over the unfinished hole of the Istanbul Metro. Flags pinning up the sky.

Slogans pasted up around the square.

“What happiness to be living in Ataturk’s Turkey.”

“Today think of Mustafa Kemal and the Republic.”

“Without ceasing we will protect Turkish independence and the Turkish Republic.”

“The Republic is the future.”

Music, popstars, celebrities, personalities! Pledges jazzing on the stage. “We love Ataturk and the Republic.” Banks of howling speakers, spotlights, cameras, cheers. Clapping hands, tapping toes . . . Fireworks, oohs, aahs, whistles, roars. Silence. The national anthem . . . Green laser light shoots across the dark of the Metro hole to play on the glass backdrop of the Marmara Hotel, “Independence or Death!”, and Ataturk’s famous silhouette trudging up the building, forever establishing the Republic . . . More fireworks!

And acrid smoke drifting over the nation, to be taken home with the children and thrown over the chair with the clothes to be worn all of the 30th of October.

This is highly unconventional and at the same time very effective, and suggests that English has no monopoly on creative writing. It is not because the writing is creative that it works well here, however, but because it is a creative way of carrying out the work of the thesis. We can feel Houston's pleasure in the writing, but when I share it with the students, I do not leave it there, but show them how the prologue is constructed to set up the writer's project, which involves tracing the ways in which republican modernists and traditional Islamists compete to inscribe public sites and activities with their versions of what it means to be Turkish. The prose of this prologue picks out the ways this effort is played out, literally, on the ground. The flags in Houston's description of Republic Day adorn not just any buildings, but sites of modernisation—five-star hotels, offices, boulevards, the Ataturk Cultural Centre, a giant crane, the Metro—the last of which is described as a work in progress, unfinished, (implicitly) like the nation-building project. With "Flags pinning up the sky," the writer seems to suggest that symbolism is the basis for the Republican "reality" of Turkey. The third paragraph foreshadows a later chapter that looks at the role of "carnival" in mobilizing identification. With Ataturk's "silhouette trudging up the building, forever establishing the Republic," the writer conveys the relentless effort involved in the creation of a nationalist identification, a theme that runs throughout the thesis. And the last brief paragraph suggests a foreboding about the effort of nation-building, which is consistent with Houston's conclusions in the thesis.

What Can Students Make of These Variations?

All of the writing, then, must further the purposes of the thesis—but if it does that, can a student feel confident that creative style will be welcomed by examiners? Students will be wise, I think, to consult their supervisors about this, for it will depend upon intellectual and methodological currents in the discipline, and even more locally. It would be misleading to represent disciplines as consistently permitting or discouraging a particular kind of practice, for disciplines do not speak with a single voice, nor from a unified mindset, as Elbow demonstrated in 1991, by delineating 10 different approaches within the discipline of English alone (see also Giltrow, 2002; Harris, 1989, p. 17; Ivanic, 1998, p. 283; Linton, Madigan & Johnson, 1994, p. 66).

Students will also be wise to show that they are not only creative writers but scholarly and analytical as well. It is probably important to Houston's success that he precedes his

“Prologue” with a summary that shows he can control the more conventional discourse of his discipline. This begins:

This thesis examines the Islamist political movement in Turkey, with special reference to its activities in Istanbul where I did my fieldwork from October 1994 to December 1996. The thesis identifies the particular characteristics of political Islam in the Turkish context. The movement’s situating of itself in opposition to the enforced civilizing project of the Turkish Republic is argued to be the key to understanding its politics (Houston, 1999, front matter).

Here, while Houston calls himself “I,” it is an inanimate subject, “the thesis,” that “examines” the movement and “identifies” its characteristics, while “the movement’s” highly abstract and metaphorical act of “situating itself in opposition” . . . “is argued” (an agentless passive) “to be the key” to the central mental activity of (who?) “understanding” its politics. Similarly, in his next paragraph, “discourse” is the grammatical subject acting on some highly nominalised objects:

Islamist discourse deconstructs the modernisation of the rump of the Ottoman Empire undertaken in the name of the universality of Western civilisation: it gleefully converges with other post-modern critiques in proclaiming the exhaustion of (Western?) modernity as a project of emancipation.

This is as abstract as the “Prologue” was concrete. Thus, the contrasting styles this writer fields enable me to show my students a range of possibilities, as well as restrictions, within what is often considered a quite sterile discourse.

“Interpersonal Work” in Impersonal Writing

In fact, I do not privilege either end of the spectrum in my sessions with graduate students, for it is important to recognise that an impersonal style is not doing any less “interpersonal work” (in the terminology of systemic functional linguistics) than a personal one. It just does it differently. The “author-vacated” essay identifies its writer, to others in the discourse community, as a person who shares (with some of them at least) the value of impersonal representation of knowledge. This may be a matter of tactics, as Ivanic’s (1998) description of a writer’s choices suggests: “by choosing another voice to ventriloquate, the writing is [showing] that s/he espouses the values, beliefs, and practices which are associated with that voice” (p. 216). Equally, it may be a matter of deeply-held values, for by writing impersonally, a student can show an appreciation of the shared goals of a discipline community. These are well described by Swales (1990), who says

a discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialisation and solidarity, even if these latter should consequently occur . . . the communicative needs of the *goals* tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discursal characteristics (p. 24).

The goal of a discourse community is to make knowledge, even if the means toward that end is to make scholars. Students who are auditioning to be scholars do well to suggest, by their choice of language, that they know what scholarship is for.

This demonstration may be done via language, through structure, or by references to the work of others in the scholarly community—the “three categories of conventions” that Linton, Madigan and Johnson (1994) identify “in all academic genres” (pp. 66–71). Even something as pedestrian as headings in research reports, they point out, “signal not only the content or objective of each section, but the writer’s commitment to one of the fundamental values underlying the empirical disciplines: the importance of shared, replicated methodology” (p. 68). While the conventional order of headings may misrepresent the actual process of research, they show respect for its values.

More obvious, perhaps, is the interpersonal work achieved by referencing, though the intensely social activity that goes on between brackets is not always evident to students. I know of no better guide to this pullulating terrain than Janet Giltrow (2002), whose gaze has an effect rather like the greenish light that wildlife documentaries use to reveal nocturnal scuttling in the undergrowth. As the creatures caught in Giltrow’s beam are scholars, however, she treats them sociably, describing them as “guests” in the text—guests who may or may not know one another, who may be more or less “popular,” and more or less “difficult to entertain” (2002, chap. 3). Giltrow’s book is an invaluable companion for graduate students in need of a sense of what a discourse community is and does with one another’s texts.

Conclusion

As Ivanic (1998) maintains, “discourses and genres are always open to contestation and change, and in reality all samples of discourse are relatively heterogeneous, recombining generic and discursal resources creatively, rather than simply adhering to a template” (p. 283; see also Harris, 1989, p. 12). The blurred vision that results can be confusing for students, and make them understandably anxious about what their options may be; but a genre perspective from WAC opens up a space for talking about this, and looking at relevant examples. I have described how the session I offer each September attempts to mediate the constraints and opportunities surrounding thesis writing, and to show

students that the interpersonal work of a thesis can be achieved both by adhering to convention and by diverging from it. By conforming to conventions, students show that they are ready for membership of their professional community. By offering a defined and relevant problem, contextualising it within the scholarly literature, giving a transparent account of their method and reporting their data, they prioritise the furthering of knowledge rather than their own career. In addition, a third person, self-effacing style can demonstrate their respect for objectivity, but it is not their only option. They may choose to show more overtly who they are by choices of strategy that set them off from others, while still being consistent with the character of their discipline.

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