

**An Advanced Faculty WAC/WID Seminar: Exploring Connections between
Genre Conventions and Disciplinary Knowledge**

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Let me first say that when I read Paul's (Paul Anderson, my co-presenter's) abstract, I was more interested in hearing from him than explaining our limited progress to you. In particular, I want to hear how he and his university were able to get the kind of cross-campus commitment to the program he mentions.

Although my university has a much more limited program, it has long had broad support for general writing across the curriculum principles. 1989 I was hired to be the second director of Salisbury University's program, but the first with a budget and a course release. I then remained in the position until I became chair of the English department, a position I held for 9 years. In the interim, we had another director who built on what I and my board had done. But in the last ten years, three of which I have once again been the WAC director and as new faculty have been hired, a good deal of the original enthusiasm has waned, for whatever reason. Since 1987 every course in the university has supposed to include a writing component, unless a faculty member has a particular reason not to include it. Although we still insist that all syllabi mention how writing contributes

to the course and to WAC program, I know that not all faculty include it, and I'm not sure I am not sure I want them too.

I am committed, however, to all students' having the opportunity to learn enough about writing, including writing necessary to understand their disciplines, so that when they graduate they have what they need to tackle graduate school or the workplace. Since the 1990's I have been interested in academic genres and particularly the idea, Berkenkotter and Huckin talked about, that faculty members acquire knowledge of their discipline without really knowing what they have learned or how they have learned it. This concept has been borne out in all the faculty seminars I have ever held. The first question I ask in an introductory faculty seminar is "When did you start to take your own writing seriously?" With the exception of English and History faculty, the most common response is in graduate school or even when writing a dissertation.

After a sequence of two seminars focusing on helping faculty use informal writing as a learning tool and develop formal writing assignments that have clear specifications and expectations in their classes, I sensed a great discrepancy between what faculty in some majors expected of their students and the writing that was required within the major. As our university is in the middle of a three-year effort to reform general education, it was particularly relevant to examine connections between our

writing program and ways different majors introduce students to conventions of the their discipline.

Building on that earlier work and work I had recently done with some faculty in the psychology department with the writing their majors develop, I developed a workshop that explores the genre knowledge of faculty from across the university and how that knowledge influences not just what they teach but the ways their departments build that knowledge throughout the major. The psychologists were consciously trying to use the writing they assigned to make their students “think like psychologists.” One frequently connected not only specifications of assignments but aspects of APA style to the development of knowledge of the nature of psychology. I knew that many other departments have capstone projects or courses that specifically deal with reading and writing scholarship in their disciplines—I was frequently asked to address them—but I could not see much coordination throughout a department with few exceptions, all of them in our School of Liberal Arts.

Consequently, last fall I held an advanced seminar, open to any faculty member who had taken an earlier seminar with either me or the colleague who held the director position when I was chair. I specifically wanted to explore the following questions that I had.

How aware of the genre conventions of their own scholarly writing are the faculty themselves?

What did they think constituted good writing in general and was good academic writing in particular?

What are their expectations of their students' or of their majors' writing by the time they graduate?

What kinds of discussions did their departments have about the disciplinary writing development of their majors?

All WAC seminars are entirely voluntary, and although we provide a modest stipend for all participants, the faculty who participate tend to be those most interested in helping their students with their writing. That was certainly true this year. The participants also were committed to developing the writing across campus and were particularly interested in ways writing in their majors could also relate to writing required in our general education program.

What I discovered was not really new, but it affirmed what I had been hearing informally from faculty I have worked on the writing in their majors. Many of the participants did not think the writing in their disciplines necessarily reflected the characteristics of "good writing" in general. A central part of the seminar was to have faculty meet in groups of three to examine the writing in their three fields and see how they met expectations and how much they were similar and unlike. They were surprised to see that articles that they selected often did not reflect the characteristics they had identified as conventions of their disciplines. The expectations of

faculty about their students' writing varied sharply. One of the participants reported continually cutting back on her expectations as she thought students simply could not handle the conventions of scholarly writing she and her colleagues produced. But she, as well as all the other participants, wanted the university to have some way of assessing the level of writing all students needed to be able to produce by the time they graduated. About half the participants focused on the role of our first-year writing course, but at the end of the seminar, they all argued that some kind of additional writing requirement should be added to our curriculum. (It is not clear who would be responsible for that instruction, and that lack of clarity probably reflects the lack of clarity about where our general education reform is going overall.)

I also wanted to mention the usefulness of Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's *Engaged Writing/Dynamic Disciplines* that described their research into faculty and student attitudes toward writing at George Mason. The last chapter in particular, which we discussed in the last of our seven meetings suggested three stages of writing development "into" a discipline, and my participants were particularly taken with some the practical suggestions in that book to help faculty move students from step 1 at least to step 2, where students recognize that teachers want different things but don't really see they fitting in to an overall pattern of a discipline.

One final thing that the seminar indicated to me was that in fact there was a great deal of discussion within departments about the writing of their majors. It seems that most of that discussion is problem statement without a great deal of solution sharing. Since before I arrived at Salisbury University, there has been a reluctance to consider “writing intensive courses, ” but at the end of this advanced seminar, all of the participants expressed an interest in learning more about them and presenting the idea anew to their departments. I look forward to learning more about Paul’s program that includes scaffolded writing requirements throughout students’ undergraduate programs.

In all my seminars, I urge faculty to develop informal and formal writing assignments that help them achieve the goals they have for their courses. My next step, I believe, is to urge departments to consider how writing instruction throughout their majors as well as within our general education program can help those departments achieve their goals as a discipline.

Before I turn proceedings over to Paul, I would like you to consider a two questions, and then I have a handout that provides the specific schedule and discussion questions of my seminar.

I then projected the first Discussion Question and had participants meet in groups of 3 or 4 to discuss; in about 10 minutes, I projected the second question and we had a full discussion with the whole group.

1. What is your impression of faculty attitudes at your institution toward connections between students' writing and meeting the goals of their majors? Of student attitudes?

2. What are the most effective ways for composition faculty or administrators to support faculty across the curriculum in developing writing skills necessary for their disciplines?

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Questions Explored in the Faculty Seminar

1. How aware of genre conventions of their own scholarly writing are faculty members themselves?
2. What do faculty members from different disciplines think constitutes good writing in general and good academic writing in particular?
3. What are faculty members' expectations of their students' or of their majors' writing by the time they graduate?
4. What kinds of discussions do their departments have about the disciplinary writing development of their majors?

Useful Works

- Berkenkotter, Carol and Thomas N. Huckin. 1995. *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Geisler, Cheryl. 1994. *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Thaiss, Chris, and Terry Myers Zawacki. 2006. *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Syllabus

Advanced Writing across the Curriculum Faculty Seminar

Fall 2015

We will be examining the writing you assign in your classes and the writing that your department assigns as your majors work through their programs. We will also be comparing how each department deals with specific conventions of your different disciplines and discussing how well your departments think the university is doing with the writing of the your majors.

Goals: Throughout the seminar we will review goals of our Writing across the Curriculum Program;

- explore what faculty in different disciplines consider the characteristics of good writing in their fields;
- explore how writing in different disciplines relates to development of those disciplines;
- consider how and when undergraduates should be introduced to the disciplinary conventions of their majors/minors;
- evaluate the extent to which different disciplines have courses and/or programs in place that aim at helping students develop discipline-specific writing conventions of their fields.

Schedule.

<i>Day</i>	<i>In the Seminar</i>	<i>Homework due</i>
1 9/17	Introduction to seminar. General discussion of the state of writing among different disciplines.	
2 10/1	Characteristics of good writing	Bring list of what you think are the characteristics of good writing and the specific features of good writing in your field.
3 10/15	Is academic writing unique?	Chap 1 of <i>Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines</i> .
4 10/29	How much is teachable?	Bring a description of the explicit ways your department addresses writing in your discipline. Identify and bring links to two scholarly articles in your field.
5 11/5-12	Group meetings: Discuss similarities and differences among your disciplinary articles. Consider also how much they reflect	Read articles from your discipline and disciplines of two other seminar participants.

	the characteristics of good writing in general and the characteristics of good writing in your disciplines.	
6 11/13	Myths and realities	Group reports
7 12/10	Wrap-up	Chap 5 of <i>Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines</i> . List of steps to take to develop university program as well as programs in the major.

Discussion Questions Shaping the Seminar Homework.

Day 2

What are the characteristics of good writing in general?

What are the characteristics of good writing in your particular field?

Day 3

In what ways does your experience with the writing in your discipline reflect the concepts of academic and alternative writing described by Thaiss and Zawacki?

Day 4

What are the specific ways your department deals with the writing of your majors?

Is there a conscious plan to develop student writing skills so that students know how the writing serves the discipline?

How much do undergraduates have to know about the scholarly writing in their disciplines?

Days 5 and 6—Group Meetings and Group Reports

In what ways do the articles from different disciplines reflect or differ from the characteristics of good academic writing that we discussed at the second meeting?

In what ways are the writing conventions in the different disciplines similar or dissimilar?

Day 7

At what stage of writing development described by Thaiss and Zawacki do you think your students should be when they graduate?

What ways can we build the Writing Across the Curriculum on our campus?

