

# Rhetorical Reading Guides, Readerly Experiences, and WID in the Writing Center

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Writing centers assist students who are in Writing in the Disciplines (WID) programs and classes in several ways. Regular writing center conference participants and avid readers of writing center scholarship and the WCenter listserv are familiar with strategies such as embedding tutors in content area classes (through Writing Associate or Fellow models), relying on tutors who bring or develop disciplinary expertise, and training tutors in genre theory and rhetoric. Some center staff also collect and annotate model papers of various genres (lab reports, memos, psychology papers, etc.) or make available what staff affectionately term “cheat sheets,” checklist-style references for writing in various genres and disciplines. But these materials, and many of the strategies listed above, rarely afford rich opportunities for writing center tutors and clients to focus their attention on the role of readership in the production of discipline-specific writing.

In their study of academic writers across disciplines, Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki report that “reading was frequently noted by students as an important factor in their development as writers in a discipline...[as it] helped them understand not only the subject matter of the discipline but also the ways in which it can be/should be presented” (128). This notion underpins a project we have launched in our writing center at the University of Saint Joseph: creating Rhetorical Reading Guides (RRGs) that can function as stand-alone resources, tutor training activities, and tutorial and workshop materials. In the margins of model papers from various disciplines, tutors are documenting rhetorical readings with an emphasis on readership—marking and explicating textual features that contribute to, and, in many cases, orchestrate a reader’s experience of its content. By engaging model texts as readers, tutors are both situating reading as a critical, generative act and foregrounding the significance of the awareness of audience—of one’s potential reader—in

text production. Because RRGs showcase explicit attention to a text's relationship with its implied reader, RRGs can strengthen the writing center as a site for fostering rhetorically aware readerly practices that promote dexterous genre-, discipline- and audience-aware tutoring and writing.

### **READERSHIP AS PARADIGM**

Ellen Carillo has argued for the rhetorical analysis of discipline-specific model texts in the composition classroom, where she “asks students to comment on the relationship between language, style, and meaning, which is relevant in all disciplines, particularly for students who are both learning to recognize and imitate how writers in [a] discipline write” (40). Likewise, Catherine Savini advocates for this practice in writing centers as a way to “avoid the pitfalls that accompany generalist or discipline-specific approaches” (5) to tutoring writing in the disciplines: “Working together to identify essential rhetorical moves...in a variety of genres,” Savini argues, does not require disciplinary content expertise (5), but does provide an avenue by which to “access...new disciplines” (3). Our RRGs also focus on writerly moves within discipline-specific model texts, but they make a crucial intervention by doing so via the lens of readership.

Our method of inquiry is less “what are the salient rhetorical features of this text”—a query often used to construct a student's first encounter with a particular genre or form of disciplinary writing—and more “how do the features of this text engineer the reader's experience of its content?” Mike Bunn's description of “reading like a writer” alludes to the significance of this approach: “when you read like a writer, you are trying to figure out how the text you are reading was constructed so that you learn how to ‘build’ one for yourself...[you] think about whether you want to make some of those same choices in your own writing, *and what the consequences might be for your readers if you do*” (74; emphasis added). Our paradigm, which focuses on these consequences, foregrounds a text's global and local rhetorical features as discursive prompts for its implied audience—that is, the implied or intended reader of a piece as constructed by its disciplinary and generic categories.

### **CONSTRUCTING RRGs**

Highlighting the way a text orchestrates a reader's experience of its content involves making a conscious effort to couch description of a text in the language of readerly moves. Rather than focusing exclusively on what a writer has done or should do (“clear

statement of topic and purpose” or “identify topic and explain scope early in the paper”), RRGs provide marginal commentary that focuses on what a text does for its intended audience: “this section helps us, as readers, understand the topic and scope of the piece, and so as we continue to read we expect to see x and y as they relate to z.”

Consider a comment RRG creator Amanda Fontaine-Iskra writes in the margin of a literature review for a psychology class. Next to a description of virtual reality exposure therapy in the second paragraph of the paper’s introduction, Fontaine-Iskra notes,

Here, the author is introducing a new type of therapy that has also been used in the treatment of agoraphobia. Given that virtual reality exposure therapy is discussed in the introduction of the essay, we, as readers, can expect that the author is not only drawing our attention to the fact that another therapy—beside cognitive-behavioral therapy [mentioned above]—has been used in the treatment of agoraphobia, but also suggesting that information regarding virtual reality exposure will continue to be expressed throughout the essay.

By focusing on the readerly moves the text prompts, Fontaine-Iskra’s comment highlights the way that the order of content manages a reader’s expectations—and also that effective rhetorical readers adjust expectations in response to signals encoded in the text.

RRG creator Tracie Romanik pays similar attention to an active reader’s experience of a text in her commentary on a history paper’s thesis statement: “We, as readers, use the author’s thesis to better understand where the paper is going. We use a thesis kind of like a road map. In this case, we [now expect to] read how the author specifically applies Jacobs’ idea of how sidewalks and bars created a safer city to 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century New York and 17<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans.” Casting the thesis statement as a signal to the reader rather than a mandate for the writer affirms its rhetorical purpose and foregrounds audience consideration in matters of focus, purpose, and organization.

In RRGs, we assume shared scholarly and composition values on the part of a piece’s implied audience—values related to genre, form, types of evidence, scope of analysis, and even syntactical constructions. On a paper in the discipline of pharmacy that analyzes research studies in order to suggest a pharmacological intervention, RRG creator Emily Wanczyk makes this note on a section describing a study’s methods and participants: “Including

information on study methodology lets us, as readers, better understand how these results were obtained. Study methods will impact overall meaning of results, and this way we can decide for ourselves if we agree or disagree with the study authors' or the paper author's interpretations." By linking authorial choice to critical readership, this comment makes overt the ways that a text's content serves a rhetorical purpose for its discipline-specific implied reader.

Phrase-level choices that impact discipline-specific readers can carry significant weight in an RRG. For instance, when the model history paper describes briefly the credentials of one of its sources, a feature marked by many historians as significant to discipline-savvy readers (Shanahan 77-79), Romanik notes, "the author is presenting Cohen in this particular way to help us understand that Cohen is a credible historian and author. [Presenting Cohen's focus and his approach] helps us know that the author of the paper is using valid support for her argument." In addition, Romanik highlights the way that hedging language can indicate to a reader that an author is using the tools of historical thinking to examine an historical event: "When we read the word 'could' we [can] understand that the author is using it to demonstrate that she does not have absolute knowledge. She can only make logical assumptions based on the evidence she has gathered." Such a comment indicates to novice writers in the discipline that discerning diction can convey the extent of analysis or argument—in essence, can distinguish between the reporting of evidence and the using of evidence to construct an interpretation.

RRGs can also elucidate the purpose of formal features of a text, making sense of genre- or discipline-specific structural elements that are often understood by uninitiated writers as merely prescribed—or even arbitrary—rules. For example, next to a bolded subheading (a common social science writing feature) in the psychology literature review, Fontaine-Iskra comments, "In this paragraph, the author is introducing the first conflict that will be addressed in this essay: duration of treatment. Including a distinct header and explaining which of the five articles held strong against this conflict allows the reader to get a better understanding of how this paper will be set up and what the following paragraphs will entail: the article assessment." In this explanation, section headings and subheadings take on a dynamic, narrative role rather than a static, formulaic one. Even citations can take on a more overt rhetorical purpose when cast as signals to readers. Wanczyk comments beside a parenthetical citation on the Pharmacy paper,

[The author] is the one who has compiled this research, and is putting it together in a unique way so that we, as readers, can understand the topic without having to read all the articles that the author read. As readers, we are able to tell that the information in a sentence preceding a citation comes from that source. If we want to learn more about it, then we can go directly to that source.

Citations often exist in the minds of novice writers as completely author-centered, perhaps because students have learned to understand them as ways to “give credit where credit is due” and, of course, to avoid plagiarizing. Here, however, the RRG clarifies how citations are also reader-oriented devices that signal author ethos and manage readerly awareness of sources.

By couching the effectiveness of writerly moves in the language of readerly moves, RRGs cast audience as neither a fully abstract concept nor a distant or idiosyncratic evaluator, but rather as a real discourse partner with whom the author communicates and for whom she makes considerations throughout the entirety of the written work. RRGs also model the ways attentive readership—that is, recognizing oneself as a discourse partner when reading—allows for the recognition (and integration into one’s own writing) of effective writerly moves.

### **APPLICATIONS TO WRITING CENTER PRAXIS**

RRGs can emphasize the roles of reader and reading in the writing center via several avenues, including digital resources, tutor training, live tutorials, and workshops during class visits.

***Stand-Alone Digital Resources:*** As digital resources made available by the writing center, RRGs in various genres and disciplines can exist alongside the instructional “cheat sheet” handouts mentioned in this article’s introduction. Offering rich explanations of readerly reactions to writerly moves, they invite writers to take a step back from their composing processes and situate themselves as readers experiencing the elements of a particular genre in action before returning to drafting or revision. Because the language of RRGs foregrounds readership, they invite students to read the model paper as well as their own potential work attentively, and to compose at the global and local levels with a general or discipline-specific audience in mind. RRGs can also be created in collaboration with a professor for a specific course delivered in any modality, wherein tutor and instructor collaborate to deliver precise, effective resources to students honing discipline-specific readerly and writerly considerations.

**Tutor Training:** A key finding for us has been that the creation of RRGs can be a significant training and professional development exercise for tutors. Although we had engaged in fairly in-depth conversation about the paradigm of the guides before tutors began creating them, many tutors struggled during their initial attempts. We recognized that two forces were at play. First, while many tutors did, indeed, learn to write in their home disciplines by reading in their fields, they also attributed much of their learning to directive, author-focused comments from their professors. Romanik notes in a reflection that shifting her phrasing in the marginal commentary of her RRG meant moving from proscriptive directions that rarely explain “the purpose behind each of the author’s choices” to descriptive comments that emphasize the results of an author’s choices for her reader (see more on this and its implications for “making audience visible” in Fontaine-Iskra’s column in this same issue). In other words, the creation of the RRG prompted Romanik to discuss discipline-specific writing in a non-directive way.

Second, while tutors had been trained to consider and discuss the intersections among audience, genre, and discipline with their students, their working understanding of the role of audience in this relationship seemed to operate on a global level with only fleeting or intuitive (and therefore inaccessible) considerations at the local level. Thus, while tutors had a conceptual understanding of readerly dynamics and often considered their readers during their own composing processes, they had less practice articulating the impact that discrete elements of a text have on a reader. As I mentored them through that articulation process, the RRGs became much more strongly focused on readerly moves. If, as Linda Flowers argues, “effective writers do not simply express thought but transform it in certain complex but describable ways for the needs of a reader” (19), then creating RRGs can give tutors facility with the language that does this describing, especially in relation to readerly responses to writerly moves within and across disciplines.

**Live Tutorials:** Tutors can cultivate this facility and the possibilities it creates during tutorials. Tutors might work through a model text with a student, prompting him to notice the interplay of textual and readerly dynamics in that composition before turning to consider his own in the same light. To scaffold that process tutors might consider a RRG as a meta-model, the comments in the margins becoming a secondary model text to prompt closer examination of the first. More advanced or discipline-specific writers might

benefit from examining documents from several genres or disciplines, the contrast generating a more precise, nuanced understanding of discursive differences employed to engage and direct readers. Thaiss and Zawacki explain that “when students are given more time to talk or write about writing expectations and the assignments that embody them in their majors, they achieve significantly greater specificity and insight” (102). Since “talk” is a key component of a writing center tutorial, writing centers are well positioned to foster such specificity and insight.

### **WORKSHOPS AND CLASS VISITS**

Each of these tutorial and training activities might occur during workshops and class visits, where reading rhetorically for a text’s engineering of its reader’s experience becomes the session’s conceptual basis and achieves similar outcomes to those discussed above. Engaging this practice in a group setting may be particularly important for naturalizing its use as a tool for reading and writing within the disciplines. James E. Warren notes that in more specialized genres in particular disciplines, students may “fail to consider how the text is geared toward a specific audience because they assume the meaning is explicit and available to any competent reader” (396), and therefore “believe academic texts are ‘over their heads,’ the exclusive domain of ‘smart’ people” rather than “thinking of academic discourse as something that can be learned” (397). If, as Warren argues, becoming well-versed in reading rhetorically in the disciplines is a gateway to deeper disciplinary literacy, then by modeling and focusing on readerly moves, we invite students into academic discourse by casting them as authentic audience members and discourse partners.

### **TOWARDS READER-WRITER IDENTITIES**

Such an invitation can have profound effects on identity. As Elizabeth Moje argues, “The practices involved in reading and writing in a given culture imbue the skilled individual with membership in the discourse community that perpetuates that culture. The practices are markers of one’s membership and identity and thus carry with them power and emotional investment” (257). Highlighting the way a text works on a readerly level widens our students’ access to academic and disciplinary literacy and positions them as reader-writers. By foregrounding attentive reading and awareness of attentive readership as avenues to effective writing, RRGs are both models and tools for helping students develop discursive identities primed for flexible, dexterous participation in various rhetorical situations, both in and outside of academia.



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