



# Writing in the Disciplines, First-Year Composition, and the Research Paper

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For years, the research-paper assignment has been associated with the “service course” concept of first-year composition — the idea that the course, in part, helps to prepare students for the writing assignments they will later receive in other academic disciplines. But until the last decade or two, the composition teachers who gave this assignment almost invariably were blissfully ignorant of the nature of research and writing in those other disciplines. Since about 1980, however, writing-in-the-disciplines researchers have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about the ways that advanced students and publishing scholars conduct research and produce scholarly writing in their fields. This knowledge should have profound implications for the future of the research-paper assignment in first-year composition — but not everyone agrees as to what those implications are.

Some compositionists have argued that because writing-in-the-disciplines research has demonstrated that research techniques and research-based writing conventions are always uniquely situated, first-year composition’s “generic” research-paper assignment has little or no carry-over value and should be abolished. Richard Larson, for example, has written that to include a research-paper assignment in first-year composition “is quite often to pander to the wishes of faculty in other disciplines that we spare them a responsibility that they must accept” (“The Research Paper” 816). Similarly, Stephen North argues for a model of research-writing instruction which abolishes the generic research paper in first year composition, and instead, “moves research writing away from Freshman English and toward the disciplines, where it belongs” (19).

But if writing-in-the-disciplines knowledge can be the basis for suggesting the *abolition* of the research-paper assignment in first-year composition, it can also be the basis for *improving* that assignment. If the assignment is intended largely to prepare students for academic writing in other disciplines, then surely our increased knowledge about the nature of academic writing in those disciplines should allow us to design more thoughtful research-paper assignments and to help students complete them more successfully. In this essay I will argue that the research-paper assignment *can* help students learn to negotiate academic discourse and begin to select academic disciplines to

pursue. I will also examine the relative merits of encouraging composition students to produce “generic” research papers or encouraging them to adopt genre conventions of more specific academic disciplines. In doing so, I will also argue against the criticisms of the research paper from those who reject entirely the “service course” rationale and its disciplinary-writing implications and instead favor almost total emphasis on helping the student find his or her “authentic voice” — a criticism heard recently from Kurt Spellmeyer, but one which goes back to Ken Macrorie and even to Richard Young’s description of “a preoccupation with the research paper” as one characteristic of the current-traditional paradigm (31).

### **Charles Bazerman and the Research Paper**

Much of my defense of the research-paper assignment stems from perhaps the best-known book examining research-based writing in other disciplines, Charles Bazerman’s *Shaping Written Knowledge*. In this examination of research-based writing in the sciences and of experimental-report writing in the social sciences, Bazerman argues that although many people, including more than a few scientists, believe that “scientific writing is simply a transparent transmitter of natural facts” (14), in actuality “persuasion is at the heart of science, not at the unrespectable fringe” (321). Furthermore, Bazerman points out, the very fact that scientific writing is widely regarded as a “transparent transmitter of natural facts” attests to its rhetorical success in that readers have become so fully persuaded by scientific discourse that they view the claims of that discourse not as claims at all, but as facts (14). When we read a scientific article as a transcription of facts, we read it exactly as its authors wish us to. But “the appearance of reality projected in scientific texts is itself a social construction” (295), and scientific writing readily lends itself to rhetorical analysis, as Selzer’s *Understanding Scientific Prose* demonstrates.

Thus, those of our students who are destined for the sciences or the experimental-report social sciences will someday be practicing a rhetoric which is powerful precisely because many readers do not perceive it as rhetorical, and thus read it wholly uncritically. Clearly, practitioners of such a powerful rhetoric should be acutely aware of their rhetorical choices. But these students are likely to be initiated into their disciplines by professors who share the reluctance of many scientists to recognize the rhetorical nature of their discourse and to consciously attend to their own writing. Thus, these students would greatly benefit from being introduced to research-based writing in first-year composition, where such writing will be presented within a rhetorical context. And the same holds true for students who are bound for other disciplines but who, as lay readers, will still encounter scientific discourse and thus will need to apply critical-reading skills to that discourse.

But while a research-paper assignment in first-year composition may help students prepare for writing in other disciplines, we should be wary of assuming that a knowledge of standard composition-class rhetoric is adequate prepa-

ration in itself. In particular, we should discourage students from assuming that what works in first-year composition will always transfer, unaltered, to assignments in other disciplines. In other words, students must learn to recognize the unique rhetorical situation implicit in any writing assignment, and composition teachers must restrain themselves from championing a generic rhetoric and inveighing against every discourse convention in another discipline as mere jargonizing. Bazerman warns against “the attempt to reestablish rhetoric as the queen of the sciences” and adds that rather than issuing “broad statements of resistance against disciplinarity,” compositionists should instead seek to provide “detailed knowledge,” including knowledge of unique rhetorical situations in various disciplines (“Second Stage” 211).

Research supports Bazerman’s warnings. Several studies have concluded that teachers in other academic disciplines evaluate student writing in fundamentally different ways than do those in composition (Shamoon and Schwegler; Faigley and Hansen). Other studies have noted the difficulties students encounter when they attempt to import procedures which had worked well for them in the past into rhetorical situations in which those procedures are inappropriate (Marsella, Hilgers, and McLaren 179; Nelson 380-81, 384-85; Sutton 232, 497-98, 586). Mike Rose, in fact, has argued persuasively that inappropriate attempts to apply “rigid rules” to changing rhetorical situations are a primary reason for writer’s block among students. So when teaching the research paper, as at other times, composition teachers must help students develop the ability to assess the unique rhetorical situation implicit in any given assignment and to adjust their strategies to meet the demands of that situation.

### MacDonald’s Continuum and the Research Paper

The dangers of overgeneralized rules notwithstanding, *some* knowledge acquired from completing research-paper assignments in composition classes undoubtedly transfers profitably to writing assignments in other disciplines. Near the end of *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Susan MacDonald identifies four points on a continuum writers must move through as they progress from novices to disciplinary insiders:

1. Nonacademic writing
2. Generalized academic writing concerned with stating claims, offering evidence, respecting others’ opinions, and learning how to write with authority
3. Novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge
4. Expert, insider prose (187)

This continuum concept, while perhaps an oversimplification, makes intuitive sense, and I will be referring to it throughout the remainder of this essay.

MacDonald suggests that assignments in first-year composition should involve the first two of these four “points” without “venturing further” (187).

And if there is a kind of writing which corresponds to MacDonald's second "point," then MacDonald's continuum suggests that the research-paper assignment, while not sufficient by itself to prepare students to produce academic writing in other disciplines, nevertheless can (almost literally) move students closer to being able to produce such writing. But given the warnings we have already encountered about the uniqueness of rhetorical situations in different academic disciplines, does such a thing as "generalized academic writing" exist?

Many researchers, including some prominently associated with discipline-specific writing, would agree that it does, and that learning the conventions of such writing can help prepare students to handle assignments in other academic disciplines later in college. Greg Colomb, in a 1996 CCCC postconvention workshop, described transcribing students' written classroom discussions on Daedalus Interchange, then requiring that each student select a topic which allowed him or her to cite a classmate's comment or position from the transcript and to disagree with or modify that comment or position. As Colomb pointed out, this assignment forces students to situate their writing within an ongoing discussion by a discourse community, clearly a "generalized academic writing" concept. Colomb's advocacy of this assignment is especially significant because in collaboration with Joseph Williams, he has written articles about the difficulties previously successful student writers encounter when they must write as novices in academic communities new to them ("The University"), as well as about the need to teach genre conventions explicitly to newcomers to an academic community ("The Case"). Even Bazerman, who has done as much as anyone to illuminate discipline-specific practices and who has warned against uncritical application of generalized rhetorical principles to specific genres, nevertheless seems to favor the "generalized academic writing" approach to research-based writing in first-year composition. In an e-mail to me, he distinguishes between "the kinds of consumer of research information roles that entering students are most likely to find engaging" and the roles as producers of such information that they may later fill as more advanced students or published scholars. His e-mail message appears to argue both that we should require only that first-year composition students learn to read and write about published research, and that learning to do this will help to prepare those students for later work as disciplinary "insiders."

### **Toward Point Three on the Continuum: Field Research and Swales's "Moves"**

Some composition teachers advocate nudging their students a bit further toward point three on MacDonald's continuum: "novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge" (187). Most of these teachers are less concerned with pushing students toward disciplinary "insider" status than with helping them to recognize that not all research must involve the library—a concept which should be obvious but which, until the recent increase in awareness of writing in the disciplines, had been obscured by

composition teachers' traditional alliance with English departments. In recent years, a number of articles (Daemrich, for example) and at least one book (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein) have focused on engaging composition students in conducting original field research. Besides familiarizing students with another research method, the field-research option also promotes positive attitudes toward the research-paper assignment by presenting research as a potentially social activity rather than the duty of the stereotypical solitary scholar, slogging through a stack of dusty, ancient texts. It also encourages students to define their roles more ambitiously, as creators of new knowledge rather than mere summarizers wholly reliant on their sources for data and interpretations. It may be unwise to require all first-year composition students to conduct original research, since some may not yet be ready or willing to assume such a role. But composition teachers should strongly consider at least making the option available to those students who feel ready for it, because research has shown both that an ambitious approach to writing assignment correlates strongly with successful completion of that assignment (Flower and Hayes; Greene; Kantz) and that professors throughout the disciplines prefer that their students adopt the role of "professional-in-training" rather than "text processor" when completing research-based writing assignments (Walvoord and McCarthy 8-11; Schwegler and Shamoon, while using different terms, make the same point).

Disciplinary-writing researcher John Swales provides another means of both nudging students toward point three on MacDonald's continuum and encouraging them to adopt a more ambitious task definition. Swales has found that in journal articles written in experimental-report form, authors typically employ four "moves" in the introduction. First, they establish the significance and centrality of the research area. Second, they selectively summarize previous research. Third, they establish the need for their own study, perhaps by pointing out an area not yet covered by previous research, highlighting a possible methodological limitation of that research, or suggesting a different interpretation of the results of that research. Finally, they suggest that their own study will rectify the problem just mentioned. Swales adds that the order of these steps may vary and that the fourth step may be left implicit (*Aspects*). Of course, most first-year composition students lack the time, sophistication, and tenacity to research thoroughly enough to state confidently that a certain area has not been covered by previous researchers, nor are they generally sophisticated enough to spot methodological limitations or produce alternative interpretations of results. But the format can be modified to accommodate most first-year students' limitations while still encouraging those students to define their task more ambitiously.

For example, a student of mine recently began her research paper by describing the power of the news media to influence the way the public perceives certain groups of people (Swales's Move One); next, she summarized the published results of a study of ways teenagers are portrayed by the news media, as well as the published findings of a nationwide survey of teenagers regarding

their perceptions of their image in the media (Move Two); then she questioned whether in northeast Wisconsin, where she lives and attends college, local news portrayals and teen attitudes toward media images would mirror those described in the national publications (Move Three); and finally she introduced her own paper, which supplemented a modest amount of library research with three strands of field research: examination of local television and news coverage over a one-week period, an interview with a friend who worked at a local television station, and a small-scale local replication of the national survey. My student did not produce a paper miraculously superior to her previous essays, one worthy of publication in a scholarly journal. But she did learn to view herself as an original researcher, creating new knowledge; she learned to test previous researchers' claims, thus approaching previously published works not as unquestionable authorities but as products of other rhetorical situations, an approach composition researchers have described as crucial to successful research-based writing (Brent; Kantz); she learned to situate her own findings within an ongoing written conversation; and she learned to limit her field of investigation and to avoid overgeneralization from limited data. These lessons should serve her well as she faces assignments in other disciplines.

### **Point Three on the Continuum and the Explicit Teaching of Genre**

This use of Swales's "moves" brings up a more general issue: should first-year composition students be explicitly taught the conventions of various genres of academic writing? Such teaching has been criticized for several reasons. Some have argued against it on pragmatic grounds. Aviva Freedman, for example, argues that students tacitly know far more than they can directly express about genre, and that those students exposed to direct instruction about genre may repress their wealth of tacit knowledge and rely on the far more limited information they have been directly taught. Thus, to Freedman, "The danger in explicit teaching is that we may thereby prevent our students from enacting what they know tacitly" (235). If Freedman is correct, then genre conventions should not be directly taught, because a number of researchers have concluded that most genre knowledge is acquired not through direct instruction but through immersion in an academic community and its discourse (Bazerman, "From Cultural Criticism" 63-64; Berkenkotter and Huckin, *Genre Knowledge* 7; Berkenkotter and Huckin, "Rethinking Genre" 498; Freedman 229-30, 239; Haas 77-78). Most knowledge acquired through such immersion is surely tacit knowledge.

But Freedman presents no evidence that direct instruction suppresses enactment of tacit knowledge, and it appears that most analysts of academic discourse, including many of those just cited, do favor at least some explicit teaching of genre conventions (Bazerman, "From Cultural Criticism"; Berkenkotter and Huckin, *Genre Knowledge* 163; Fahnestock; Swales, *Genre Analysis* 1; Williams and Colomb, "The Case"). Several textbooks, the best

known being Bazerman's *The Informed Writer*, openly attempt to familiarize first-year composition students with certain conventions of various kinds of academic discourse. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine a first-year composition student with tacit knowledge of, for example, Swales's "moves." And while a slavish adherence to these "moves" or to any other genre convention could, as Freedman warns, cause students to ignore their own tacit knowledge of alternatives—one envisions all those students who ignore their best ideas in order to assure that their essays conform to a five-paragraph, three-part-thesis requirement—surely many discourse conventions may be taught as options to be added to the student's repertoire, not as the *only* acceptable form writing may assume in first-year composition.

### **Spellmeyer, the Student's "Authentic Voice," and the Research Paper**

But the teaching of disciplinary genres has been criticized on other grounds besides purely pragmatic ones—in fact, on grounds which criticize such instruction as altogether *too* pragmatic. Kurt Spellmeyer, for example, has argued that "the prevailing tradition of discipline-specific writing instruction encourages both conformity and submission" from composition students ("A Common Ground" 266), and that when those emphasizing discipline-specific writing instruction use the term "empowerment," they really mean "pragmatic accommodation" ("A Common Ground" 267).

But while Spellmeyer's criticisms may be valid regarding certain teachers in certain courses, from the perspective of writing in the disciplines and first-year composition they may be something of a straw-man argument. Writing-in-the-disciplines adherents, well aware of the wide range of academic genres a first-year composition student may have to deal with in the future, are unlikely to force those students to venture so deeply into any one genre as to require slavish imitation. The only first-year composition teachers likely to demand "conformity and submission" to a particular kind of academic discourse are those English-department fixtures, the evangelical disciples of literature, professors whose goal in first-year composition is to teach students to explicate *belles lettres*. Writing-in-the-disciplines adherents, unlike teachers of literature-as-composition, generally recognize the folly of forcing students to conform to the conventions of a discourse community they have no desire to join.

Spellmeyer has also argued against the teaching of discipline-specific writing on more political grounds, stating that composition should not emphasize the specialized discourse of various academic specialties, but rather the shared discourse needed for productive citizenship in a democracy (*Common Ground* 15). Rather than encouraging students to assimilate the voices of academic "insiders," Spellmeyer argues, composition teachers should help students to find their own "authentic voices," so that students are "permitted a dialogue between the intellectual traditions of the school and the local knowledge of home and neighborhood" (*Common Ground* 38). Thus, we should

help students develop the “ability to resist the coercive power of authoritative language” (“A Common Ground” 268-69), rather than helping them to assume that power by adopting that language.

Spellmeyer voices legitimate concerns and presents substantial arguments. Nevertheless, his arguments do not negate the case for research-paper assignments, or even for a modest amount of exposure to specialized academic discourse and genre conventions, in first-year composition. In the first place, a composition teacher need not make an either/or choice between emphasizing personal voice and emphasizing academic discourse. Students ordinarily complete a number of writing assignments in first-year composition, some of which may emphasize the student’s personal experiences and “authentic voice,” others of which may emphasize academic research and a more detached voice. And as may be confirmed by a glance at pages 894 to 896 of Spellmeyer’s own essay in the December 1996 issue of *College English*, even a highly academic, research-oriented essay may include substantial portions of personal narrative and the less formal style in which such narrative is ordinarily presented. The decision to adopt certain conventions of a specialized academic discourse does not preclude the use of “authentic voice” — or perhaps more accurately, the use of certain conventions of a kind of discourse which readers traditionally have been more willing to describe as “authentic voice.” In fact, the field-research projects advocated by many writing-in-the-disciplines enthusiasts seem an ideal vehicle for the “dialogue between the intellectual traditions of the school and the local knowledge of home and neighborhood” (*Common Ground* 38) sought by Spellmeyer. In portraying discipline-specific writing instruction as the foe of “authentic voice,” Spellmeyer again comes close to the straw-man approach, portraying composition teachers who emphasize discipline-specific writing as cousins to those secondary school teachers who tell students “Never use ‘I’ in a school essay, especially a research paper.” In reality, the study of academic genre has encouraged much more flexible views of writing, the sort demonstrated by James Raymond’s and Gesa Kirsch’s recent articles in *College English* exploring the rhetorical effects of an author’s choice to use or not to use the authorial “I” in academic writing.

Finally, there remains Spellmeyer’s suggestion that we encourage students “to resist the coercive power of authoritative language.” In the first place, as demonstrated by the earlier example of my student’s paper about teenagers and the media, teaching composition students discipline-specific conventions can at times help those students adopt a questioning stance toward published studies, thus helping them resist the power of potentially coercive language. Moreover, students will have difficulty resisting something if they do not know that it exists or if, knowing that it exists, they cannot decipher it. If teachers deny students the opportunity to gain control over “authoritative language” on the basis that such denial is for the students’ own good, those teachers are exercising the very paternalism they so often criticize. As Elaine Maimon puts it, “Those who would keep students igno-

rant of the academic landscape in the name of helping them find their own rebellious voice do not understand much about guerilla warfare” (xi-xii).

In addition, as discussed earlier in this essay, because many “insiders” in academic discourse communities wield their “authoritative language” with little thought to the political implications of that language, one could argue that composition teachers are almost obligated to introduce their students to that language so that future “insiders” will use language more thoughtfully and others will read it more critically. As Bazerman notes,

Discourse studies of the disciplines, which aim to understand the dynamics of each field and the state of play into which each new participant enters, can help build the intellectual foundations for courses that enable students to enter into disciplines as empowered speakers rather than as conventional followers of accepted practice, running as hard as they can just to keep up appearances. Even more, discourse studies can provide an enlightened perspective through which students can view the professional and disciplinary fields with which they will have to deal as outsiders. (“From Cultural Criticism” 67)

Yet I would still argue that in first-year composition, exposure to such genres should be extremely limited, because of human nature and the students’ situations. As is implicit in the latter part of Bazerman’s quotation, most undergraduates will not eventually earn graduate degrees and become “insiders” in an academic discourse community. For that matter, almost half of all first-year composition students will never graduate from college, and even among those who will eventually graduate, most have little or no idea what their eventual major will be. And as Bazerman states in his e-mail to me, students must “find meaning and value in a discourse before they will see the point of much explicit teaching about the organization of the discourse or how to participate in it.” Thus, when Bazerman introduces certain conventions of relatively specialized academic research and writing in the later chapters of his composition textbook *The Informed Writer*, he does so in a way that suggests he is primarily concerned with helping students to read and critically consider research-based academic writing, and only secondarily concerned with helping them to produce such writing, and to conduct the research which precedes it, themselves. So even after largely rejecting others’ claims about the dangers inherent in teaching conventions of specialized academic genres, I believe that such teaching should be at most a minor portion of the research-based component of first-year composition, for one simple reason: most first-year students are not ready to understand fully, or to become interested in, such genres.

Actually, there is a second reason, equally simple: most composition teachers are not adequately prepared to teach such genre conventions. For whatever reasons, administrators nationwide have chosen to staff composition programs as inexpensively as possible, largely with graduate students new to

teaching or with part-time teachers hired on an adjunct basis. Many of these teachers do a wonderful job, far better than their institutions' lack of financial commitment deserves. But as Richard Larson points out, to teach students about the many genres of academic discourse requires a staggeringly broad range of knowledge and interests, and most administrators are unwilling to make the financial commitment necessary to assure the hiring of teachers who will always be equal to the task ("Three Recent Explorations" 344, 351).

So where does all this leave us? For the most part, back at point two on MacDonald's continuum, although a few of us, like baseball players taking a big lead in hopes of stealing a base, keep edging toward point three through advocacy of field research, Swales's "moves," or other procedures from the disciplines. And on the whole, we should be satisfied with where we are. Even among writing-in-the-disciplines researchers who otherwise stress the desirability of knowledge of highly specialized rhetorical situations, there is a sense that conventions of "generalized academic writing" do exist and that mastering those conventions can help students prepare for writing in other disciplines. Nor must we view "generalized academic writing" only as a means to an end as the hierarchy of points on MacDonald's continuum implies, with the point-two writer longing to achieve point-four status the way a runner on second base longs to score. Producing good generalized academic writing is an impressive and highly desirable achievement in itself, blending the best of the shared public discourse of citizenship championed by Spellmeyer with the rudiments of specialized discourses analyzed by the writing-in-the-disciplines researchers. For composition teachers and students, as for ballplayers, one could do worse than to be on second.

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