

COMPLICATING GENRE CHOICES IN WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Bryan and my parents, Bonnie and Bill. Thank you for believing in me, for loving me, and for praying for me throughout this whole process. I'm so glad you're mine.

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Thus far the Lord has helped us. –1 Sam 7:12c (NIV)

This thesis as an Ebenezer to the Lord—a sign of his faithfulness past and a sure hope of his faithfulness to come.

To Bryan—my cheerleader, support, love. Thanks for encouraging me to rest, making me laugh, and helping me to press on when I wanted to give up.

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It always seems impossible until it's done.

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Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. —Ephesians 3:20-21 (ESV)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Writing Intensive (courses)	WI
Writing Across the Curriculum	WAC
First Year Composition	FYC

ABSTRACT

COMPLICATING GENRE CHOICES IN WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES

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Though genre theory has been central to discussions in writing scholarship for 30 years, it is not as central in other academic fields. This thesis studies genre theory, genre awareness, and professors' curricular choices via interviews with WI faculty and an analysis of WI course syllabi and writing assignments. Overall data reveals that professors are asking students to write primarily for an audience of their professors and that writing is used primarily to measure their students' understanding of course content, though some faculty do focus on genre and rhetorical awareness to a lesser degree. These findings suggest that classroom practices don't align with composition and genre scholarship, nor with the values professors espouse themselves. This thesis recommends WAC administrators explore genre with faculty in conversations and Professional Development, in order to make genre knowledge explicit. It also recommends genre analysis that recognizes writing as a dynamic social act of negotiation and recommends genre analysis as a way forward in the classroom.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“If teachers can articulate the purpose given to a genre by the social group that awards it meaning in the first place, inexperienced writers will more fully grasp the conventions of the genre because they understand their readers’ expectations.”

–Mary Soliday, *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines*

Composition scholars such as Elizabeth Wardle have argued that assignments within First Year Composition (FYC) are often inauthentic “mutt genres”—they don’t reflect genres outside the classroom or university and they don’t mirror the writing students will do in the field (774). Wardle’s argument highlights the disconnect between what is argued in genre scholarship and the genres found in the classroom. At the heart of genre scholarship is the argument that writing is social and that genres are social actions, as Carolyn Miller first defined them. That is, writing is situated within a social context and those who write act strategically with respect to that social context. As Amy Devitt succinctly writes, “people use genres to do things in the world” (“Integrating,” 698). However, in many classrooms, genres are instead defined as merely formal features or a set-in-stone formula, stemming from their definition in literary theory.

Nevertheless, students’ awareness of the rhetorical situation—the audience, purpose, and genre in which they write—is essential even more than a mastery of genre

“forms,” because it allows them to adapt to new writing situations later. This discussion of genre theory by composition scholars also has direct implications for how writers write and how we teach writing in the Writing Intensive (WI) classroom, though the pedagogical situation does differ between Composition and the WI classroom. An understanding of genre as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,” as defined by Miller, affects the way we present writing to students (159). If writing instructors hold to this definition, they present writing not so much as fixed and formal entities, but as dynamic negotiations of factors such as situation, audience, purpose, relationships, and history.

In order to explore genre awareness, my research examines the assignments professors choose for their WI courses and the rationales behind those choices. I conducted an ethnographic study including 13 interviews with Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) professors, and then collected their course syllabi and assignments. The ethnographic study model allowed me to explore questions of how faculty design their courses and why they make those choices, then describe these in relation to genre theory and writing pedagogy.

As I completed my interviews and began coding and examining interviews and documents, the focus of my research began to shift. Though I continued to focus on how professors define genre and choose assignments, I noticed that many professors resisted me asking them to define genre. This resistance shifted the focus of my investigation from the professors’ genre definitions to investigate the professors’ resistance itself and the other ways they define genre.

My research shows, first, that professors position themselves as a certain type of reader for student writing assignments and second, that these assignments are primarily measures of student comprehension. Professors primarily position themselves as a reader who assigns writing, measures student understanding against their own, and grades writing. These themes suggest that students are not being given a sense of writing outside the classroom or university, though my study did reveal some professors who frame assignments in this way. When assignments focus on measuring understanding, however, the audience remains primarily the professor as grader. With the professor positioned as a reader who assigns the writing, measures student understanding, and grades the writing, students perceive writing as limited to the classroom and a task to be completed. Instead, WAC writing pedagogy argues that professors benefit from teaching writing in a way that situates writing within their disciplinary field, so that students consider the rhetorical situation and understand why and how they must write the way their professor requests (Soliday 14).

We might assume that the genres professors choose to incorporate in their classrooms reveal what they value in student writers, but my work demonstrates a disconnect not only between genre scholarship and the practices in WI courses, but also a disconnect between the genres professors choose and their own course values. When professors primarily ask students to write in order to assess their understanding, they value writing as merely a means for students to grasp course content. If, however, as Wardle writes, a “tremendous number of genres mediat[e]...activities within the university,” then recognizing a variety of genres is essential, not only in the composition

classroom or English department, but in writing across the university (781; see also Bawarshi “The Genre Function” 347). Professors of WAC and WI courses can help students recognize genres in their field not only by modeling rhetorical writing, but also by guiding students in genre analysis to study the genres in their field—and this analysis can help professors learn about genres in their field, too. My research reveals some professors are more proficient in guiding students’ rhetorical and genre awareness, as I will describe later.

My research echoes earlier findings in composition scholarship and has important implications for the way forward in WAC programs. My data reveals the gap between what is argued in genre theory and what is put in practice in the classroom, and it reveals how faculty are often resistant to or unaware of genre scholarship. This study’s findings suggest that as a result of students writing for limited purposes and audiences, they are less able to write in new rhetorical situations because they are not able to adapt to and analyze these new social actions. It also reveals ways professors can model and support students’ rhetorical decision making while writing, through the examples of a few professors in my study.

Elizabeth Wardle, Mary Soliday, Bawarshi and others suggest teaching students to analyze writing and rhetorical situations in genre studies instead of teaching “mutt genres.” As mentioned above, genre analysis can help professors clarify their understanding of written genres as well. Genre analysis that allows students to recognize writing as dynamic shows them that though each writing instance is influenced by previous genres, as Devitt points out (“Generalizing about Genre”), writing inherently

varies with each new instance. If we acknowledge that students must approach writing as a social action and dynamic negotiation, then genre analysis may look like asking students to study writing (Bawarshi “Genre and the Invention” and Wardle). In addition, we may teach students as writing apprentices “immersed in social situations that provide steady contact with audience” (Soliday 14), or we may present them with audiences and purposes outside of the classroom (Wardle). Wolfe et al. also offer a helpful model for genre analysis, Comparative Genre Analysis (CGA), which I will explore in greater detail later. Further, it’s worth noting that other restricting factors for faculty and students must be considered, such as staffing difficulties, WI course requirements, and university-wide culture, that I will explore further in my conclusions. First, I will review the scholarship on genre theory in order to establish its centrality in the writing classroom.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin with a review of genre scholarship and composition pedagogy, both of which make clear that there are implications for student writing when professors do or do not teach genre. Genre theory is a vital part of the writing classroom and writing scholarship, and though it may be difficult to teach in WI contexts, several scholars have suggested practical methods for incorporating genre in the classroom, which I will introduce here.

Genre Theory Defined

Students benefit from an understanding of genre when learning how to write across the curriculum because they must understand the social negotiations and rhetorical actions they make as they write. Indeed, the concept of genre has been central to a number of different writing and pedagogy conversations for the past three decades. Carolyn Miller first defined genre theory as rhetorical responses to recurring situations, in contrast to those who define genres based on their literary type or structural features. Miller was the first to define genres as social action, a new theory combining multiple disciplines' approach to the concept. Miller challenges fixed, closed definitions of genre by arguing for a clear, formal theory based in rhetorical practice "and consequently open rather than closed and organized around situated actions" (155). Genre and writing

theorists have been teasing out her definition ever since then, seeking to understand its implications and how genre is “composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic”—Campbell and Jamieson’s definition, which Miller expands upon in her central work (152). Helpfully for a pedagogical approach, Miller values every day writing genres and the names we have for these. Miller’s theory permits us to study the writing we do everyday and help students to see the value of everyday writing situations and re-figure all writing as social actions situated specifically. For instance, a student’s research proposal is situated socially within their course and their discipline’s research field and acts by proposing a specific research plan and argument. In my study, Miller’s theory allows me to examine the genres professors assign in WI courses, and it provided context for my conversations with professors about genre.

To Miller’s theory, Devitt adds the context of history. Genres develop, Devitt argues, out of a history we and others have of responding to situations: “The fact that others have responded to similar situations in the past in similar ways—the fact that genres exist—enables us to respond more easily and more appropriately ourselves” (“Generalizing” 577). Writers don’t write within a vacuum; rather, they act within the history of their own writing and others’ responses to similar situations. Devitt’s argument makes it clear that genres operate within context, and they’re not necessarily formal. When students understand this historical context for genres, they are better prepared to write within new contexts in the future because they see writing as a series of negotiations, instead of a-rhetorically, as an isolated act. Moreover, Devitt argues that Miller’s genre theory allows us to study the purpose of what we write, a concept that is

especially helpful as I examine the assignments given in WI courses. What is the purpose of these assignments? Why do professors choose to assign these genres? I will explore these questions in my study.

Genre as a Dynamic Social Negotiation

Similarly, Bawarshi adds to Miller's definition, writing that genre represents "a situated and typified way of rhetorically organizing, conceptualizing, relating to, and acting in our real or imagined environments" (*Genre and the Invention* 76). Bawarshi theorizes genre as the place of invention, a place of dynamic social negotiations; which amplifies Devitt's ideas by considering not just historical context but social context. Students must understand this dynamic social context in order to write within it; otherwise they see themselves as writing alone or merely checking off a list of formal features, and they are not prepared to write for different contexts in the future. Bawarshi proposes that genre analysis is a helpful method to make students aware of genre because it "can make visible to students the desires embedded within genres; and by giving students access to these desires, we enable them to interrogate, enact, and reflect on the relations, subjectivities, and practices these desires underwrite" (*Genre and the Invention* 146). Thus, students become reflective, analytical writers, and as Bawarshi argues, "we gain more by teaching students how to adapt as writers, socially and rhetorically, from one genred site of action to the next," than by teaching students formulaic genres or vague concepts of "good" writing. Genre analysis and rhetorical awareness will prepare students to write for the next "genred site of action" (*Genre and the Invention* 156).

Soliday, too, sees social negotiations as key to understanding genres. She defines genre as shaping “how writers talk *about* something *to* someone *for some reason*... Genre is a *social practice* through which writers interact with readers...[and] because it is a social practice, readers and writers make everyday genres interactively” (2-3). These social negotiations add to the social context for which Bawarshi argues and the historical context of Devitt. Students must understand these social negotiations in order to understand genre and writing, or they risk seeing writing as an a-rhetorical transaction between themselves and the professor and are unprepared for new writing situations.

Genre Pedagogy

Pedagogically, faculty benefit from the concept of genre, as do students. When faculty understand the concept of genre, they are able to better match course objectives with writing assignments, see connections with writing in other disciplines, and see the difference in the writing students will do outside the classroom. At the post-secondary level, Michael Carter studies the connections between ways of knowing, doing, and writing across the disciplines. Carter calls these “metagenres,” which he defines as “broader patterns of language as social action, similar *kinds* of typified responses to related recurrent situations” (393). By organizing writing into metagenres, based on ways of knowing, doing, and writing, Carter hopes to help faculty make connections between writing in their discipline and others, as well as increase the value they place on writing within the work of their discipline. His concept of metagenres can help faculty define genres in ways that make sense for work in their disciplines—something many of

my interviewees struggled to do. This definition is necessary “because professors typically learn to write in their disciplines not by any direct instruction but by a process of slow acculturation through various apprenticeship discourses, [thus] they are unable to see that writing itself is specific to the discipline,” as Carter argues (385 and similarly, Beaufort 15).

Moreover, Carter finds that especially in the metagenre that calls for research from other sources, “the similarity in ways of doing tends to mask the different ways of knowing in the various disciplines.” This approach echoes the findings of Chriss Thaiss and Terry Zawacki, as well as Anne Beaufort, that while faculty may use the same language for assignments (especially research ones), they have different expectations and students struggle to understand these differences (399). Thaiss and Zawacki found that faculty confuse students by defining “good writing” differently within and across disciplines, as well as using the same terms (e.g. “poster presentation”) for assignments for which they have differing expectations. Thaiss and Zawacki’s interviews and workshop analyses are full of evidence that professors assign writing in many different genres and for various reasons. The question remains how to best make these varied reasons (i.e. varied social situations and genres) explicit to students, because “when very real differences are cloaked in the language of similarity, it’s understandable that students would find it hard to decode what teachers want” (Thaiss and Zawacki 59). Thaiss and Zawacki’s research reinforces Carter’s mission of clarifying for faculty (and thus, importantly, students) the terminology and genres they ask students to write. Genre

analysis can be one means to clarifying this terminology and genres of writing for faculty and students.

Chris Anson argues that faculty writers' misconceptions of student writing begin because "the genres of the academic professions are sometimes at such a distance from canonical college assignments or the kind of pseudo-disciplinary writing that students must produce that it's difficult for faculty to imagine that it all exists along a development continuum" (24). Like Carter, Anson notes these disconnects between faculty writing and student writing and he proposes that WAC administrators step into this space to offer "more opportunities to assist faculty with their own writing, in addition to helping them more richly understand, and tend to, the needs of their own students" by listening well and prompting professors' thinking about writing with questions (21).

Importantly, Carter argues that while it's helpful for WAC development to show faculty how to use writing as a tool for learning, this method "doesn't always clarify the differences between what students will write professionally after graduation and what they're writing in the classroom" (25). It's unclear from my research whether the professors I interviewed received similar WAC development or other writing instruction. Many of the professors in my study used writing as a means for checking comprehension, but weren't asking students to write for a variety of purposes and audiences outside the classroom. This limited use for writing creates a problem when students write primarily to an audience (the professor) who is measuring students' understanding of material the professor already knows. Instead, writing pedagogy argues that when students write for a variety of rhetorical situations and see their writing as situated within the context of the

field, they are better able to adapt to new rhetorical situations later, such as the workplace.

Genre Theory in Practice

After my research, it remains to be seen whether this kind of writing for authentic audiences and purposes is possible within the university—and this question remains in composition scholarship. Elizabeth Wardle argues that instead of teaching “mutt genres”—genres that “mimic [others] that mediate activities in other activity systems, but within the FYC system their purposes and audiences are vague or even contradictory”—FYC professors benefit from teaching students *about* writing instead of merely assigning grades (774). She argues for this approach especially because “the rhetorical situations of FYC courses...do not mirror the multiple, diverse, and complex rhetorical situations found across the university in even the most basic ways” (766). Further, her argument here is based on her understanding of genre: “genres are context specific and complex and cannot be easily or meaningfully mimicked outside their naturally occurring rhetorical situations and exigencies,” which aligns with that of Miller and Beaufort (Wardle 767). Thus, Wardle argues that the very nature of genres makes them difficult to enact in the college classroom.

Wardle recommends, instead, that FYC professors focus on teaching students *about* writing, which is a more transferrable skill than broad genre knowledge and which uncovers the specifics of new writing situations. For my own research purposes, this approach would suggest that WAC professors also teach about writing within their field

as a genre study, though their pedagogical situation differs from FYC (780). As Wardle notes, WAC professors would be best at teaching genre study because “nearly everything we have learned as a field over the past decade suggests that specialized writing is best taught by reflective insiders who know the genres and their contents, in the activity systems where those genres mediate” (783). If it’s difficult, as my research suggests, for faculty to make genre conventions for their field clear, studying the genre with students would offer a means of discovery and meaning-making for WAC professors. A genre analysis approach may also help address the problem constituted by the “tremendous number of genres mediating...activities within the university,” as Bawarshi also notes (Wardle 781). In genre study (or analysis), as outlined by Wardle, professors and students would “take stock of the genre, how it works and does not work, whom it serves and does not serve, and so forth” (783). Genre analysis in WI courses is a promising way forward, which would more accurately reflect genres as social action.

Beaufort explains that genres given in writing courses, like Wardle’s “mutt genres,” “are not explicitly named as genres ‘belonging to’ or a part of the practices of particular discourse communities; they are what some have called ‘school genres’” (13). Instead, Beaufort repeatedly recommends that Composition and writing instructors in general teach students about genre “in relation to [the] social contexts in which they function,” echoing Miller’s original definition of genre and the emphasis of Bawarshi, Devitt, and Soliday (146). This context, Beaufort argues, goes beyond that of the classroom or school, and she believes it is essential that students grasp “the ‘real’ social context for writing,” as she describes it (144). Soliday also argues for the importance of

the social setting of genres, explaining that “to learn a practice, we have to be immersed in social situations that provide steady contact with audience,” an argument that supports the idea of providing authentic writing situations for students, but which contradicts Wardle’s argument that these are not possible in the classroom (14). Soliday explains that “if teachers can articulate the purpose given to a genre by the social group that awards it meaning in the first place, inexperienced writers will more fully grasp the conventions of the genre because they understand their readers’ expectations” (35). This work remains to be done in many of the WI courses I reviewed, though some professors offered helpful means for framing writing assignments.

Much of my research suggests that students write primarily for an audience of their professor and are limited to the social setting of the classroom or university. Dan Melzer found similar results in his (much more extensive) study. Melzer found that most student assignments were written for the professor and written to inform—what he calls “transactional writing” (131) and I call “writing to understand.” Moreover, “just as informative writing dominates at all levels of instruction in my study, the dominant audience for the assignments at all levels of instruction is ‘Student to Examiner,’” Melzer explains (134). What he calls “Student to Examiner,” I call “writing for the professor as audience,” and the similarity of our results suggests that my findings echo broader ones in composition research. Students are not being prepared to write in new contexts when they write primarily for professors who positions themselves to focus on measuring student understanding against their own and grading student writing. In my study I found that often the professor as a reader who grades students’ writing zeroes in on grammatical

proficiency especially. Focusing primarily on grammar is another type of a-rhetorical approach to feedback when students are not given the situated feedback to know why these grammatical concerns matter to the writing (Hartwell).

The theory of genre as social action, as Miller first defined it, is central to composition and writing pedagogy. Research in these fields argues that students benefit from an understanding of genre in order to write in new situations. An understanding of genre allows them to adapt to new writing situations and grow as writers who are rhetorically-aware. Though genre theory is central to discussions in composition and writing pedagogy, there are complications in applying genre theory to WAC and WI contexts. There, the concept of genre is not yet as prominent in those contexts, and faculty may be unaware of larger writing studies and research on genre. Further, WAC administrators may face resistance from faculty when working with them to incorporate the concept of genre theory. Nevertheless, it is in conversations with faculty that WAC can begin their process of helping faculty uncover the genres and metagenres in their fields (Carter), and make these explicit to students (Anson). However, Devitt and Bawarshi, like Soliday and Beaufort, offer practical suggestions to help students grapple with genres in productive, thoughtful ways. Both Devitt and Bawarshi ask students to look critically at genres, either in genre analysis or other critical engagement with a genre set, an essential step towards greater genre awareness.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Research Method

My primary research method for this project was analysis of interview and course documents. I conducted interviews with 13 professors from across the disciplines at George Mason University (Mason). First, I recruited professors via email, according to IRB procedures, using the Provost's list of professors who teach WI courses in the WAC program at Mason. In the email, I asked professors to participate in a study of genres in WI courses, explaining that current composition scholarship argues that genre awareness helps students improve their writing. Participation in the study was voluntary (see Table 1 for a list of participants' departments). At Mason, those who teach Writing Intensive courses may be tenured faculty, tenure track faculty, term faculty, or adjunct faculty.

Table 1. Interviewees by Department Designation

Interviewee Number	Department
1	Biology
2	Art History
3	Integrative Studies
4	Computer Science
5	Health Management

6	Modern Languages
7	Computer Game Design
8	Criminology
9	Communication
10	SCHAR School of Policy & Government
11	Economics
12	SCHAR School of Policy & Government
13	Geology

Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Interviewees were asked if they would like to share syllabi or assignments from their WI courses. Sharing these artifacts was not required, but all participants shared the syllabus for their course and most also shared assignment descriptions or related materials (see Table 2). Though this data set would be more comprehensive if classroom observations were added, the pairing of documents and interviews offered insight into assignments and the rationale behind them, and allowed me to explore my research questions on genre. Professors were able to expound upon their genre and curricular choices in interviews, creating a richer picture and data set than assignments alone. By collecting assignments and syllabi in addition to interviewing professors, I was able to examine the values professors expressed in interviews against the practices in their courses.

Table 2: Associated Materials Submitted by Interviewees

Participant Number	Department	Documents
1	Biology	Syllabi (2), lecture presentations (8)
2	Art History	Syllabus and assignment description
3	Integrative Studies	Syllabus (including assignment descriptions)
4	Computer Science	Syllabus and assignment prompts
5	Health Management	Syllabus (including assignment descriptions)
6	Modern Languages	Syllabus and assignment descriptions (6)
7	Computer Game Design	Syllabus and assignment descriptions (7)
8	Criminology	Syllabus and

		assignment descriptions (5)
9	Communication	Syllabus and assignment description
10	SCHAR school of Policy & Government	Syllabi (2) and assignment description
11	Economics	Syllabus and assignment descriptions (2)
12	SCHAR school of Policy & Government	Syllabus and assignment descriptions (8)
13	Geology	Syllabus and assignment rubric

The interviews included the following questions, in addition to a request for course documents and demographic basics such as their department, their number of years at Mason, and if they currently teach a WI course.

1. What type of writing assignments (assignments in which students produce writing and submit it for your grading or feedback) do you include in your WI-course? Why?
2. How and why did you choose these assignments in particular (in reference to the 1 or 2 specific assignment artifacts we examine)? How would you describe the purpose and goal of this assignment?
3. How would you define genre?
4. Tell me about the most frequent genres you write in as a professional within your discipline.
5. Tell me about the most frequent genres you teach to your students.
6. To what extent does an understanding of writing in your discipline affect your design of writing assignments for your WI course? How so?

I transcribed the interviews, removed identifying information, and then completed three rounds of coding. I developed these codes by taking notes during the transcribing process and by discussing the research with my director. I first coded for evidence of the professors' genre awareness, exploring the following questions: How do professors

describe the assignments they give students in their WI courses? How do they define genres? What types of genres do they list or describe using in their courses? How do various professors’ definitions or descriptions compare and contrast with those in the field of composition? After the first round of coding, I narrowed my codes to four. After an additional round of coding the interviews, I added one code and removed another.

The final codes were as follows:

1. Interviewees who challenge the term “genre”
2. Interviewees who see themselves as the primary audience for student writing
3. Interviewees who describe student writing as mirroring their own—“They do what I do.”
4. Interviewees who described the purpose of an assignment as writing for comprehension or understanding

The coding of interviews was followed by a coding cycle for the course documents interviewees shared with me, using the four codes above and shown in examples below, in Table 3.

Table 3: Codes and Examples

Code	Interview Example	Document Example
Interviewees who challenge the term “genre”	“I don’t know...when I saw that in your [research and interview] description, I	n/a

	wasn't sure what you were intending by that." – computer science professor	
Interviewees who see themselves as the primary audience for student writing	“So one of the things that I, that I put a great deal of emphasis on and it's in part because students are not very strong in it, is organizing and supporting your ideas. And so the papers, I require an outline with every paper, and I also have them do something I call an organizational exercise.” –communications professor	“Did you use the necessary headings/subheadings and format them correctly? Skip a line before level-one headings. No orphan headings. Did you use equivalent structures for equivalent sections?” – writing checklist, criminology
Interviewees who describe student writing as mirroring their own—“They do what I do.”	“I think because of my position, I can see the usefulness of other types of writing besides an academic research paper.” – economics professor	n/a

<p>Interviewees who described the purpose of an assignment as writing for comprehension or understanding</p>	<p>“So the idea is to get them to apply those theories of justice to a crime to help deepen their understanding of the theories and also to set them up so they know what they're doing when they write their paper, 'cause that's exactly what the paper is about.” – government professor #2</p>	<p><i>“In other words, show that you've read and understand the text while sharing your personal/original take as efficiently as possible...Demonstrate a firm understanding of the text by citing from more than one chapter.”</i> – reading response, game design professor</p>
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Developing Codes

Each code was developed from the themes and repeated ideas I recognized as I transcribed and completed the initial rounds of coding. The first code, “interviewees who challenge the term ‘genre,’” emerged out of participant responses to question three, “How would you define genre?” Many interviewees stated they did not use the term in their own classroom or did not know how to define it, especially in their department’s context. The computer science professor, for instance, replied, “I don’t know...when I saw that in your [research and interview] description, I wasn’t sure what you were intending by that.” When pressed, many professors replied that genres were “types” or “categories”

of writing, which is consistent with the definition in literature and in contrast to the definition in composition.

Question six especially asked participants to consider how the context of their professional writing affected the assignments they chose for students. Some participants struggled to answer this question, or responded that the assignment's purpose was primarily for the classroom or academic context. This coded response often came across when professors described giving students feedback, such as the professor in the College of Integrative Studies:

And when I get that kind of feedback, it makes me learn, but it makes me appreciate that somebody cares enough to read my work and tell me what they think of it honestly. So, I do; I tear those papers apart. And then I give them back to them, right—standard procedure. Let them see the feedback, and then they can turn it back into me after they've implemented my changes.

In this way, the second code was developed: “Interviewees who see themselves as the primary audience for student writing.” This quote, as with others labeled in the same way, does not situate student writing in the context of the field and does not reference other audiences for student writing.

As I transcribed, I noticed that several interviewees described student assignments as mirroring their own writing. One interviewee, the economics professor, explained that in his work he does not primarily write academically: “I think because of my position, I can see the usefulness of other types of writing besides an academic research paper,” thus

he assigns other writing for students than research papers. The third code was developed thus. Professors with similar interview responses described student writing as modeled after their own work in fields such as Art History and Biology.

The final code, “Interviewees who described the purpose of an assignment as writing for comprehension or understanding,” was developed in a similar way, as I realized during my second round of coding that multiple professors described the purpose of writing assignments as “checking for understanding.” The criminology professor described it in this way: “So the idea is to get them to apply those theories of justice to a crime to help deepen their understanding of the theories and also to set them up so they know what they're doing when they write their paper, 'cause that's exactly what the paper is about.” The focus of this assignment, as with others that professors described, was primarily comprehension of course content and meeting the requirements of the course. For the majority of responses coded as “writing for understanding,” professors did not see a purpose for the assignment beyond that of the immediate course or beyond student comprehension of course material. These four codes help set up the analysis of genre awareness in WI courses and the extent to which this awareness mirrors current composition scholarship on genres.

Developing My Methods

My research method is similar to that of Soliday, Carter, and Thaiss and Zawacki in that it is ethnographic research and a case study based on interviews with professors. In addition to interviews, Carter’s study and mine also examined course documents:

program objectives in his case, syllabi, writing assignments, and other course documents in mine. In our focus on course documents, we were both more focused on specific courses than the other researchers I mention here. My research is based on my own interest in genre theory and though it will benefit the WAC program at Mason, Carter has as a stance as a WAC administrator that I do not. Like Carter, after my research I moved from examining documents and conversations to examining them in light of genre theory. In this, Carter's analysis is a helpful way to analyze and organize a great wealth of data through the lens of genre theory.

My questions, however, were similar to those of Soliday, and Thaiss and Zawacki. In her work with WAC at CUNY, Soliday examined genre in their composition program. One of the primary questions Soliday's research examined was the language professors across the disciplines used for student writing assignments. I asked the same of WI professors at Mason, though with a greater focus on the specific genres professors use to describe their students' writing. Though Soliday's specific research methods differ from mine, she nonetheless conducted a study broadly similar to mine—first observing, then asking questions and seeking to understand the situation without judgment. Thaiss and Zawacki's research was based on interviews and workshop analyses, unlike mine, but they asked professors about the assignments and curricular choices they made just as I did (25). Their research has important conclusions for my own, as I will argue later, but my selection methodology was broader and less personal than Thaiss and Zawacki's--they chose professors they knew to be writers and personally

knew well, and the interviewees I selected were garnered from an email request sent to all WI professors.

Limitations

A primary limitation to this study is that the voluntary participants did not include members of every department (called colleges at Mason). Specifically, no participants from the College of Education and Human Development, School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, or the Business School were involved in the study. Some departments are overrepresented, particularly the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, or underrepresented, namely the Volgenau School of Engineering, the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and the College of Health and Human Services. Nevertheless, participants were recruited from all the colleges and were varied even if they were in the same department (see Table 1). The total number of participants, 13, is large enough to constitute a strong case study.

Perhaps the greatest drawback was that my research did not include classroom observations, which we know are essential to fully understanding the working of a classroom. Educator interviews and classroom documents alone do not fully portray the active negotiations and social interactions of the course. A more extensive, broader study of genre at Mason could include professors from even more disciplines as well as classroom observations. These observations would lead to rich data on genre in practice. Nevertheless, within the documents examined from the 13 participants from 12 different

disciplines, this study was imbued with rigor through multiple rounds of coding and the exclusivity of having one researcher transcribe and code all the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Overall, data in both interviews and course documents revealed degrees of genre and rhetorical awareness. Interview data revealed two themes that were less prevalent in documents: professors who challenge the term “genre” and who claim their students’ writing imitates their own. Nevertheless, analysis of this same data also revealed professors tend to identify themselves as the main audience and tend to assess students’ understanding foremost.

I found in course documents that these were the most prevalent themes: the professor as the main audience and writing assigned as comprehension checks. Codes for these themes were most often made within the directions or descriptions for writing assignments.

I made codes for these themes more often in the course documents than in interviews, though they were present in both. In addition, in interviews professors expounded upon their reasoning and choice of audiences and purposes for these assignments. Analysis of course documents reveals explicit examples that I will treat below, and analysis of the interviews reveals implicit examples that I will also discuss. In my exposition, I will focus on those themes most prevalent in both interviews *and* documents: first, the professor positioned as audience and second, writing for understanding.

Professor as Audience

The professors in my study positioned themselves as a particular type of audience: as an audience reading student writing primarily to correct deficiencies or as an audience reading primarily to keep students within the specific confines of assignments that professors believe rigidly reflect the field (“gatekeeping”). Both audiences are primarily concerned with improving student writing overall, editing student writing, or measuring student writing. Nevertheless, there were professors who showed hints of rhetorical and genre awareness by assigning and reading student writing in ways that consider social situations, audiences, purposes, and genres outside of their classrooms.

Correcting Student Deficiencies

The professors I interviewed primarily positioned themselves to correct student deficiencies. Three professors described their assignment choices as being motivated by student deficiencies, primarily in grammar and research. The communication professor in my study described why he assigned an outline to students thus:

So one of the things that I, that I put a great deal of emphasis on and it's in part because students are not very strong in it, is organizing and supporting your ideas. And so the papers, I require an outline with every paper, and I also have them do something I call an organizational exercise.

Similar choices around correcting student deficiencies were popular: the first government professor described assigning students research to address students' lack of research skills. She explained,

students don't use the library and source materials in the same way as they used to because they're trying to get everything online. So I want them to do research, I want them to cite sources, and I want them to think about the issues in the class. Because I don't write exam questions that you can find on a given page on the book.

Another, a criminology professor, gives students a workbook to review grammar and APA citations in order to remediate lessons she believes they should have learned in English 302 and high school English. Though this desire to correct student deficiencies may be motivated by a desire to clarify student writing for other audiences, it positions the professor as the corrector of deficiencies and main audience. This positioning occurs when professors do not frame the assignment or feedback in a way that evidences other audiences or purposes beyond their own in the course. When professors believe they are primarily responsible for editing student writing and measuring it for correctness, they read primarily looking for these errors, without positioning students for other purposes or audiences. Moreover, students then focus on writing to please the professor and to avoid mechanical errors that lead to deductions, thus limiting the audience and purpose of their writing as well.

Three professors position themselves as the audience to primarily edit students' writing. These professors saw students as deficient in an academic sense: in their view,

students lack the grammar or formatting skills necessary to be successful in the context of the university. The professor of integrative studies describes her motivation thus:

The second time around, I do; I want that paper in perfect APA. And it's good feedback for them. I mean, I appreciate the people that did that for me when I was...writing...And when I get that kind of feedback, it makes me learn, but it makes me appreciate that somebody cares enough to read my work and tell me what they think of it honestly. So, I do; I tear those papers apart.

Here, the professor as editor and primary audience sees herself as a mentor for student writing, correcting students' formatting and grammar in order to improve their writing. We know, however, from composition scholarship, that primarily focusing on grammatical errors does not improve student writing nor does it improve their genre or audience awareness (Hartwell).

Gatekeeping

Another set of professors positioned themselves as gatekeepers by giving students very specific instructions for assignments. As “gatekeepers,” they position themselves to initiate students into very rigid guidelines the professors believe restrict and define writing in their field (or their classroom). These guidelines or instructions do not reflect the dynamic social negotiations of writing nor do they allow students to genuinely negotiate writing within those genres—they leave students aware of only the formal features of genres and their professors' expectations. These instructions varied from lists

of do's and don'ts to detailed descriptions of assignments. For instance, a biology professor shares the following slide as part of a PowerPoint that accompanies a writing assignment their students complete (see Figure 1). On the slide, the “do not,” “always,” and “never” make professor expectations clear and position the professor as the audience who corrects and measures student writing.

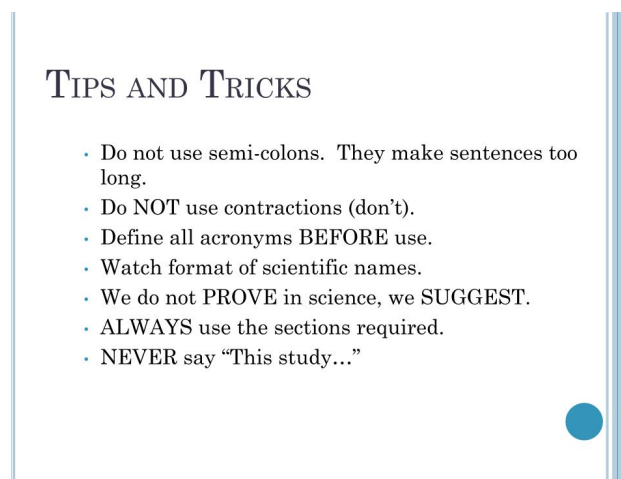


Figure 1

Other professors positioned themselves as gatekeepers by giving detailed checklists or lists of specific instructions. For instance, the professor of criminology gives students an eight-page checklist for their major course paper that details formatting expectations for every section of their paper. For the middle sections, the professor requires students to check “Did you use the necessary headings/subheadings and format them correctly? Skip a line before level-one headings. No orphan headings. Did you use

equivalent structures for equivalent sections?” The extensiveness of this checklist, coupled with very specific formatting guidelines, conveys to students that they must meet these (professor) expectations to succeed—there’s very little negotiation of rhetorical or genre situation. The checklist is also not situated within the field, which suggests to students that this writing exists only in the context of the course.

The communications professor in my study offers a similarly thorough list for two papers on his syllabus, specifying formatting details for the draft of a speech critique. In the following quote, I’ve underlined the guidelines that are more rhetorically aware:

“Develop a research question or thesis statement that will focus your analysis and clarify your arguments. Place it toward the end of the context section or introduction. *Italicize this!*” Though the first part of these directions gestures towards rhetoric, the specificity of such guidelines does not leave much negotiation room for students and it establishes the professor as the main reader. Again, if students are not given an understanding for these specific guidelines, they’re left writing primarily for the professors, without an understanding of how these guidelines are situated in their discipline. Most professors were not so explicit, but two other professors used checklists not reviewed here.

Hints of Genre or Audience Awareness

Some professors indicate genre and rhetorical awareness in course documents that they didn’t in interviews. For instance, the following note hints at some genre awareness even as the professor returns students to his preferences:

This essay will be graded on thoughtful reflection of the trial and its deliberations. Because of the more personal nature of this essay, use of a more casual first-person narrative format is acceptable...but essay must still demonstrate appropriate organization, grammar and style.

This computer science professor hints at the student's rhetorical choice when he notes that writing can be in the "more casual first-person narrative format" "because of the more personal nature of the essay." But then he tells them explicitly what is expected on this assignment, thereby clarifying how the student can satisfy the professor as reader.

In a similar rhetorical move, the professor of Game Design and Writing focuses on the mechanics of writing because he sees it as evidence of professionalism, but he also describes how he encourages creativity and alternative forms. He explained that on his rubrics,

I like to leave a lot of freedom and encourage risk taking. So always on every rubric I ever put out there, sort of grammar, mechanics, spelling, what they name their file, I call professionalism because I believe that that is...well, that is what it is.

The professor creates an interesting juxtaposition of purposes not only because creativity and mechanics are often seen in opposition, but because this professor says he is pushing students to recognize an audience outside of the university (fellow professionals). The professor is supporting students as they make rhetorical decisions to address their professional audience and assessing students on how they write in their field. He pushes them to a greater awareness of audience and situates the assignment in their field, by

emphasizing “grammar, mechanics, and spelling” as key elements in appearing professional. In his syllabus, the professor of game design explains, “All work should be cleanly edited: free of careless mistakes. Any questions you have regarding the use of the English language or other conventions should be researched thoroughly before taking them to the instructor,” under the “professionalism” section of his syllabus. The professor’s explanation is interesting because he again calls upon students to recognize the audience of professionals that they will join even though he is nonetheless the audience who will evaluate it. He calls students to consider another audience, giving students rhetorical reasons for his choices as a professor and helping students to see the dynamism of even grammatical correctness.

Another interviewee uses an informal journal assignment but still describes her reading practice in a high-stakes way. The Modern Languages professor I interviewed described her grading of a freewrite journal assignment thus:

I will evaluate the entire composition book filled with the semester’s entries at the end of the semester based upon your improvement on suggested revisions made each week. That is, every week you should be attempting to work towards more advanced writing style with fewer grammatical errors, greater critical depth with your subjects, and a more fluid style.

Freewrite assignments are often graded as a low-stakes writing assignment where students can freely explore ideas for themselves as an audience. But by grading them in a high-stakes way, this professor changes the expectations of the student and professor

audience in a manner that recalls Thaiss and Zawacki's study of professors. They found that professors across disciplines used the same terminology for their assignments but had different purposes and expectations for those terms, which was confusing for students (63). Here, though a student may expect a journal assignment to be a place where they can express themselves and think through material, the professor positions themselves as an audience only focused on lower-order concerns, correcting, revising, and evaluating student work to a fixed, rather than rhetorically dynamic, standard. Though the professor explains the grading policy, she could better frame the assignment to show students why these lower-order concerns are important rhetorically. This evidence, coupled with Thaiss and Zawacki's research, suggests again that professors may benefit from analyzing genres alongside their students, where both can recognize and negotiate rhetorical moves within those genres.

Writing for Understanding

Professor (Still) as Audience

The second most dominant theme was professors who ask students to write in order to check their understanding. For five of the professors I interviewed, these assignments were reading responses. For all assignments where this theme emerged, the professor will be the one to measure that understanding; thus, the professor is again positioned as an audience who corrects and measures student writing. Moreover, the professor measures student writing against what he already knows about the course

material, meaning the student writing is then a-generic at best. Here, writing is a means to a measuring student understanding of course material or concepts, rather than a means to accessing the dynamic and rhetorical purposes of genres.

For instance, my interviewee from the School of Integrated Studies describes student papers in educational terms: she says they support the objective “the learner will know” and are “a solidification of their learning, as well as the “demonstration of a learning outcome.” Two other interviews, one with the computer science professor, and one with the first interviewee from the SCHAR school, confirmed that writing was a means to improve student understanding or to make students consider the material more deeply. These writing assignments are situated in the classroom and their focus is inward on the course material and content, and this inward focus does not prompt students to consider other audiences and purposes. An outward focus on audience and purpose supports genre-aware writing as students are prompted to navigate rhetorical moves. Genre awareness, in turn, helps students make rhetorical decisions in new situations outside the WI course.

Eight of the professors I interviewed indicated that measuring student understanding is the main purpose of the writing assignments they give. For the geology professor, the choice was simple: “I want them to learn about the topic...that's why they're given these assignments,” he replied, when asked to describe the purpose of student writing assignments. Again, the focus of these assignments is isolated to the context of the classroom and its content.

Similarly, in composition theory the academic or research paper is often criticized as a type of writing limited to only the university. In his response, the economics professor in my study confirmed this limited audience, while also describing the academic research paper as checking for understanding:

And so there, I'm less concerned with whether or not the argument would hold up in a policy debate or an academic journal, but more I'm concerned is do you understand the economics terminology well enough to know that this is the best match and how I've defined it is correct? And that shows me understanding at the level that I'm shooting for.

The professor has set up the assignment in a way that denies other audiences or genres; thus, the writing only has purposes within the course and for the professor as a reader who is evaluating student understanding. His interview and corresponding syllabus, taken together, describe all three of the course's writing assignments as checking for understanding, at least in part: from the weekly journals, to the research paper, and the nonprofit profile and action plan. In the weekly journal, students are to "submit a journal entry that summarizes the reading assignments in their own words" and the nonprofit profile and action plan "will provide background information about the organization and identify a key problem or challenge that the organization faces." The majority of assignments in the Criminology and Integrative Studies courses were also designed to check for understanding. Moreover, the geology professor, as mentioned previously, described it to be true of all his assignments ("I want them to learn about the topic...that's

why they're given these assignments”). In other words, the majority of the assignments in these WI courses included descriptions that indicated the professors were primarily checking for understanding.

Complicating this purpose, the second government professor from the SCHAR school describes an assignment as having dual purposes: students must first understand the course material in order to then be successful on the assignment. As she describes it, “So it's a way of making sure that they understood the content...So if they say...‘I suggest that we introduce [proportion of representation systems]...because then we're going to have two parties,’ that is kind of obvious that they don't understand.” The professor knew countries with proportion of representation systems usually have more than two parties, thus, students’ misunderstanding of the government systems showed in the proposals they made. All but one of the assignment materials submitted by this interviewee include phrases (such as, “Write an abstract which summarizes the objectives and goals of the project...”) that show their purpose is to assess for understanding, at least in part.

The criminology WI course had a similar purpose in that the focus of low-stakes assignments was also primarily comprehension, but the professor used low-stakes writing as a stepping-stone to a different assignment in the course, a research paper. For this professor, all the assignments assess student understanding, as she details:

the short, low-stakes assignments, I chose them both to deepen the students' understanding of the concepts that we teach, both of writing and of theories of justice, as well as to help to set them up for the paper...The

idea is that all these things, you know, interplay together to get the, to motivate the students to really learn and apply the concepts.

Here, the writing assignments are given to fuel student understanding that will later be applied in the research paper.

Of all the WI professors I interviewed, eight of their courses (62%) have at least one assignment that checks for understanding. For half of those courses, assignments that check for understanding make up the majority of assignments given in the course. This proportion is significant because even though writing is a good measure of students' understanding of course materials, students benefit from writing for multiple purposes. Further, when students write primarily for understanding, they write primarily for the professor—thus they lack variety in audiences for which they write as well. It is in writing for multiple purposes and audiences that students are equipped to write in new rhetorical situations and genres.

Written Reading Responses

Many of the responses and documents which I coded as “writing for understanding” were written reading responses. Five professors whom I interviewed assign written reading responses. Though the art history professor notes that “reading critically does not mean gathering information from a text,” one of the guiding questions she offers for weekly readings is, “What are the author’s major arguments?” and she later asks students to “identify the main arguments of a reading” on a blog post assignment. These questions primarily check for students understanding of the reading material,

though the professor espouses different purposes for the assignment. A question that would encourage students to analyze the genre and writing in the field might read, “Discuss what the author’s most important arguments in this piece are, explaining your reasoning.” As it is, her stated learning values don’t match the stated assessment values of the assignment given.

The professor of game design also assigns reading responses, which incorporate some other skills, but still focus mainly on comprehension. In the following quote, I’ve underlined phrasing that hints more at measuring understanding. As he describes in his syllabus, “In other words, show that you’ve read and understand the text while sharing your personal/original take as efficiently as possible,” and then, “Demonstrate a firm understanding of the text by citing from more than one chapter.” Through this and several guiding “what” questions, the professor asks students to personally respond to the text or otherwise interact with the text, yet understanding remains a major goal of the assignment, as it is for most reading responses.

Some professors repeat these reading response assignments frequently—for two, students are assigned weekly reading responses. The professor of communication asks several reading questions on a weekly basis, including: “What primary arguments have they made as a public figure, and why are they strong or weak?” So, too, for the economics professor, who assigns weekly “write to learn” reading responses. By asking students to respond to readings, professors reinforce class material, while measuring students’ understanding of course material against their own. Though the communication professor’s questions are asking students to analyze the piece (a more rhetorical move), in

both his course and the economics one, there is no clear indication of any other reader than the professor. This limited audience does not challenge students to think rhetorically nor does it situate the writing in a genre outside the classroom.

By way of contrast, the second government professor asks students to write three memos, which “should present a concise summary of the week’s readings,” yet the assignment also asks students to engage rhetorically with those readings, asking, for instance “What type of institution? Why? Benefits for Iraq? Potential outcomes? Moreover, you should cite at least four sources...”. These memos also feed into class discussions or group presentations, and the professor sometimes asks students to imagine an audience (“Your boss asks you [to] gather data on a variety of ‘unstable’ regimes to make recommendations about political regimes.”) and for each memo, students are required to send their writing to fellow students, both of which expand the students’ audience and genre awareness. Thus, the professor assigns a reading response that is situated to show students why and how to write in the field. The way the professor frames the piece shapes what students consider and what the assignment does for students.

The health administration professor I interviewed teaches a synthesis course (like the Computer Science course discussed earlier) which poses unique challenges and affects his description of course outcomes and objectives. In contrast to those assignments already discussed, the health administration professor did not just design the course writing assignments to assess students’ own understanding, but to further the understanding of the class as a whole. “Equally importantly, it provides our learning

community with an opportunity to gain knowledge through the sharing of information,” he writes in a description of a collaborative presentation project. Here, the writing for the presentation is positioned as a chance for the class to gain knowledge. In the rubric for the same group presentation, the professor writes, “Excellent command of material and in-depth...understanding of subject matter. Highly accurate in explanation,” to describe the highest score students can earn. Thus, the professor emphasizes his criteria for “understanding” throughout the assignment’s documents, even though he positions it to increase the understanding of the whole class.

Two Outliers

Despite the majority of writing in my study being largely a-rhetorical, two interviewees described guiding students to a more explicit rhetorical awareness than other professors in my study. The game design professor I interviewed had the most discipline-examining assignments, calling on students to consider what counts as so called “good” writing in the still-to-be-defined field of game design writing and asking students through various assignments what their place is in the field, both in gaming scholarship and industry:

In light of current trends in the games market and popular culture, what is considered “good” writing for games and how might we define it? How do storytelling, collaborative writing, and narrative design enhance the skills I hope to use post-graduation?

The same professor invited students to submit their game narrative review (written for the course) to an international Game Narrative Review Contest. These assignments and opportunities help students think rhetorically about writing situations and audiences outside the classroom. Still, he admitted it's difficult to teach writing in his discipline in part because many argue game writing is not "teachable." This professor spoke at more length than most other interviewees about the rhetorical awareness he hoped to develop in students, while still including writing assignments designed to assess comprehension. He also emphasized grammar and spelling accuracy in his assignment descriptions (as in the description mentioned earlier, where he emphasized professionalism). Unlike other assignments in my study, these assignments were situated in the field and called on students to explore "good" writing in their field or write for other audiences. These are valuable starting points: by encouraging and supporting students as they make rhetorical decisions and analyze genres in their field, this professor is raising the rhetorical- and genre-awareness of his students.

Though less explicitly than the game design professor, the Modern Languages professor I interviewed spoke of growing rhetorical awareness in her students. She also led students in an analysis of modern journalism and sought to prepare students with real-world genres such as the résumé, cover letter, and podcast. Here is a professor who put a lot of thought into what genres will be most helpful and useful to students:

more and more students are going to be asked to present themselves, or want to present themselves as bilingual. And sometimes they're going to be...hired by, you know, Spanish language businesses or

organizations. And...a lot of our students haven't even had the opportunity to write a cover letter and a CV necessarily in English, so...what I have them do is to look up on these different job sites, to ideally to create a LinkedIn profile and um and then to...seek out jobs that they're interested in...and then to craft a cover letter and the CV as if they were actually interviewing for that job.

Here, students are actively engaged in seeking out the kind of work they'd be interested in ("look up on these different job sites...seek out jobs that they're interested in"), and ideally creating a résumé and cover letter based on what they find there. According to Devitt's description—"people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose)"—these are genres as social action ("Integrating," 698). These assignments, like those in the Game Design course, help students to imagine an audience outside the classroom and push students to write to those audiences, which requires them to think rhetorically. And in both courses, these are assignments students can revise later for an audience outside the classroom—an important contrast to assignments that function only in the classroom and which do not call on students to imagine audiences outside the classroom. In both cases, students are given situated writing assignments that give them a sense of why and how to write in their field. Students are empowered as faculty frame an assignment that does something in the field and that pushes students to consider the social action of that genre.

It is not true, however, that all professors assign students assignments that only address themselves. Seven professors discussed at least one assignment that asked

students to address another audience, either an audience of fellow students, an imagined audience, or a suggested outer audience (such as the game design contest mentioned earlier). Asking students to address another audience is an important move towards rhetorical awareness, because the more opportunities students are given to write for various audiences, the more prepared they will be for writing in new rhetorical situations.

To the extent that some professors like these guide students in writing for genres in their field, these genres are usually very clearly defined by the professor. Most students aren't doing genre analysis or being asked to analyze the situation and rhetorical needs. Even more nuanced approaches such as that of the computer science professor mentioned earlier ("Because of the more personal nature of this essay, use of a more casual first-person narrative format is acceptable") fail to allow students to analyze and negotiate genres. Though these professors gesture towards rhetorical awareness for their students, they replace the students' rhetorical work with explicit instructions and reinforce themselves as the reader who assigns, measures, and grades student writing, without situating writing assignments in their field of study.

The prevalence of assignments written for an audience of the professor (who assigns writing, measures understanding, and grades writing), as well as assignments written to measure students' understanding raises several questions:

- Will students improve their ability to write for other audiences and purposes outside the university by writing primarily for their professors and primarily to check for understanding?

- How will these assignments prepare students to meet the demands of unique genre settings in the future?

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

If, as Bawarshi comments, “Genres can serve as the ‘passports’ for accessing, analyzing, navigating and participating in disciplinary structures,” then my research shows that students aren’t getting this crucial access (*Genre and the Invention* 155). Instead, professors are primarily asking students to use writing as a means to achieve course objectives. For some, it is the nature of the course and its competing goals that constrains:

But because ours is really a synthesis course, and its theme is to introduce computer scientists to law...we're not gearing it toward ‘what does a computer scientist need to know how to write in order to write a technical journal, for example.’ That's not the theme.

The computer science professor quoted here noted that the other WI course in the major may be more focused on writing in the discipline, and he was one of two instructors I interviewed who teaches synthesis courses. Nevertheless, his was not the only course using writing to measure learning, without seeking to grow students’ rhetorical or genre-awareness: four other professors described a similar goal in their interviews.

Despite the work of genre theorists to make writing largely rhetorical and to raise genre awareness (Bawarshi *Genre and the Invention*, “The Genre Function”, and *Genre: An Introduction*; Devitt *Generalizing* and “Teaching Critical Awareness;” Wardle ““Mutt

Genres”), I found that student writing assignments are still largely a-rhetorical in my study of thirteen WI courses. Though the concept of genre is central in writing pedagogy and scholarship, my research suggests it is not as central or nuanced to the conversations of WI professors. Eight professors described writing as a means to measure understanding in their courses, and eight professors described themselves as the primary audience for the majority of writing assignments. Four of those who use writing to measure comprehension assign a majority of writing-to-understand assignments to students in their WI courses. Of those professors who described themselves as the main audience, three positioned themselves as checking for correctness in student writing and three positioned themselves to address student deficiencies (mostly in grammar, formatting, and research). The majority of professors assigned largely a-rhetorical and a-generic assignments, but there was some evidence of professors who guided students towards greater rhetorical and genre awareness. These examples, coupled with methods from writing scholarship, offer hopeful models of how to increase students’ genre awareness.

Implications

Writing is largely a-rhetorical and a-generic when professors position themselves as a reader who assigns writing, measures for understanding, and grades writing. Moreover, if students write mostly to check their comprehension of course content and mostly for an audience of their professor, they will not have the practice writing for various genres and rhetorical situations and will be unprepared to write in new writing

situations—or be able to think for themselves in new writing situations. Despite 30 years of arguing that students need to write for various audiences, in various genres, for various purposes, faculty are positioning themselves as the primary audience and a reader who checks for student understanding and adherence to the professor's assignment requirements. We know variety in rhetorical purposes teaches students how to adapt in new writing situations, thus it is disappointing that these situations are still dominant in WI courses. Though we recognize that genre theory is more prominent in conversations for WI professors, students are severely limited as writers when they primarily write to an audience of professors who positions themselves this way. They are not prepared to write for audiences they will encounter later, within and outside the university, and they do not see the power of what their writing can do as social action.

Coupled with this limited audience, many professors in my study emphasized correctness by focusing on editing students' work or curtailing deficiencies in their writing, with the goal of checking for understanding and creating more proficient student texts. Yet we know from writing research that focusing primarily on mechanics does not address the rhetorical writing needs of students (Hartwell). Moreover, students in these courses are often given course documents with very specific instructions which do not allow them to explore genres as dynamic social negotiations, meaning they will not know how to analyze and write in the next rhetorical situation. Both of these goals—emphasizing correctness or very explicit instructions—reinforce writing with the purpose of pleasing an audience of professors who position themselves as readers who assign, measure, and grade writing instead of allowing students to write for other audiences and

purposes. Writing for various audience and purposes requires writers to think and respond in ways that are rhetorically sound because they see their writing as rhetorically and social situated. Bawarshi argues that teaching students *about* writing (i.e. genre awareness) will better enable them to adapt to unique writing situations, a suggestion I will explore a little later (*Genre and the Invention of the Writer* 156).

Writing in the disciplines theorists would nonetheless be encouraged to know that writing is being used as a tool in the classroom. Writing to learn is a useful way of making meaning and assessing one's own understanding, or for instructors to assess their students' understanding. Asking students to write responses to their readings can be more effective and rigorous than short-answer quizzes or multiple-choice questions (Melzer). It is disconcerting to learn that writing assignments assessing comprehension and addressing the professor make up the majority of assignments given to students in WI courses, despite so many years of work to encourage student writing for various audiences and purposes. The challenge for WAC administrators, then, is to engage in conversations with WI faculty over genre and to encourage the use of practical methods in WI courses, such as genre analysis.

Genre Analysis: a Way Forward in WI Courses

Bawarshi and Devitt argue genre analysis is a practical method for teaching genre awareness. Bawarshi proposes that genre analysis “can make visible to students the desires embedded within genres; and by giving students access to these desires, we enable them to interrogate, enact, and reflect on the relations, subjectivities, and practices

these desires underwrite” (*Genre and the Invention* 146). Though Bawarshi primarily suggests it for FYW courses, I believe genre analysis could also work well in WAC courses, though I acknowledge that professors of these courses often do not have access to the nuanced conversation around genre that is present in writing pedagogy. These courses have the potential to be more genuine contexts for writing because professionals in the disciplines teach them and, as Wardle notes, “specialized writing is best taught by reflective insiders who know the genres and their contents, in the activity systems where those genres mediate” (783).

In genre analysis, students study a broad sample of writings within the genre they’re to write in. Bawarshi suggests beginning with genres known to students, such as greeting cards, lab reports, and obituaries (*Genre and the Invention* 158). Students’ analysis focuses on the motivations, purposes, writerly moves, audiences, nuances, constraints, and adaptations in those texts. Devitt proposes a similar approach when, in reference to Aviva Freedman, she points out that no one can ever adequately teach novices a genre and that genre criticism must lead to action (*Teaching Critical Awareness* 338). That is, students must act within genre in order to understand the decisions and moves they make as writers.

In their analysis, moreover, students need to understand concepts such as what’s been done in a certain genre and how you might change it, who writes in the genre, and why and how, and what perspectives writers speak from (Wardle 783). Devitt emphasizes this critical understanding because “when writers take up a genre, they take up that genre’s ideology. If they do it unawares, then the genre reinforces that

ideology”—and so, too for the genres teachers choose (339). Teaching writing and making students aware of “genre’s ideology” is therefore critical, especially because a greater awareness of the ideology, politics, and limitations of genres will help students participate in them and change them, Devitt proposes. She guides students to engage with genre as a thing, a process, and a field (a helpful physics analogy she borrows), and thus helps them become “writers with expanded genre repertoires, including more antecedent genres, and writers with expanded genre awareness, including heightened sensitivity when they encounter new genres in the future” (349). If, as genre theorists argue, each writing situation is a social act, then students must understand how to analyze genres and make writerly decisions in new rhetorical situations.

Wolfe et al. propose using Comparative Genre Analysis (CGA), their name for a specific type of genre analysis that allows students to bridge their knowledge of one discipline’s ways of writing with a new discipline. Though they argue for it within FYC, and though genre is less of a central concept in conversations for WI faculty, the central concepts and tools of CGA make it applicable to WAC contexts. Further, if CGA were a method used in FYC as well as WI contexts, there would be a natural bridge for students to use rhetorical genre analysis and compare disciplinary ways of writing. CGA can also be a guide for WI professors to recognize the rhetorical strategies within their disciplines and help professors guide students to make connections to prior knowledge. The method is similar to that of Michael Carter’s “metagenres,” in that it reveals similarities across disciplines, but the CGA approach “identifies specific rhetorical activities that span such groups” and helps students to see variations and contrasts within and between disciplines

(Wolfe et al. 47). Essentially, students are given terms and definitions for cross-genre rhetorical activities, then asked to compare and contrast these in an essay that analyzes multiple genres of texts students select. The authors give guiding questions students can consider as they write and the authors frame the assignment to show students why it is important within their disciplines and how it will help them. The essay asks students to do all the important work of genre analysis: identify specific examples of rhetorical moves within the different genres, compare and contrast these moves across disciplines, draw conclusions on how to write, and write their essay within an academic “macrostructure” (Wolfe et al. 76-77). CGA is a helpful model for the kind of genre analysis essential to growing students’ genre- and rhetorical-awareness.

Further Suggestions

To equip professors with genre analysis, WAC administration would do well to begin with conversations with faculty members. As Anson suggests, these conversations are not chances for WAC administrators to show how much they know, but are chances to listen to faculty and ask questions that reveal knowledge about the genres and writing in professors’ disciplines (33). This distinction is especially important because faculty often resist the term “genre,” may be unfamiliar with genre writing pedagogy, and may find it difficult to make their discipline’s specific writing knowledge explicit (Beaufort, 15; Thaiss and Zawacki, 62). If WAC administrators can help faculty to see writing in their disciplines as part of a larger “metagenre,” as Carter names it, they are more likely to see writing in their discipline as connected to thinking and doing in their discipline,

and see connections to other disciplines as well. Writing then becomes a “way of knowing and doing in their discipline” instead of merely an add-on requirement placed upon them (393).

I learned in my research, nevertheless, that we’re going to have to overcome faculty resistance because they sometimes don’t see the value of this genre work. When asked to define genre, only three of the professors I interviewed did not push back. Most others said that they didn’t know what I meant by that term or don’t use it in their discipline. For some faculty, conversations will first involve overcoming their resistance to teaching writing in their discipline, as WI courses are designed. One method to overcome their resistance is coaching them to situate writing assignments and feedback to give students a sense of why and how to write in their field. Further conversations will involve how to prepare students for different audiences and purposes within and outside the discipline, with genre analysis, for example, wherein faculty can learn about genres alongside students. It is this experience with genre analysis and writing for various audiences and purposes that will equip students to write in and transfer their writing experience to new situations.

Of course there are a number of complicating factors that will undermine in a material way the work of WAC administration. As previously noted, genre theory is not as prominent in conversations with the disciplines outside of writing studies. Further, faculty are limited by department constraints and policies that assign WI courses to new professors or to professors who lack experience writing in their discipline or who lacks knowledge about WI courses. WI course requirements (such as enrollment caps or

feedback-revision cycles) are difficult to maintain across a large university. Even more so, creating a university-wide culture of writing is a difficult, lengthy process that many resist when there are so many other initiatives, interests, and responsibilities for faculty and students.

Nevertheless, these conversations and negotiations are still valuable. Faculty are equipped to understand their field more fully and to equip students as writers when they develop vocabulary not just about finishing an assignment, but about being rhetorically savvy. By focusing on more general “metagenres,” these conversations can be freeing, as they lead faculty to explore their field more broadly and orient assignments for purposes and audiences beyond the classroom.

My own research and teaching will be shaped by my study of genre theory as I continue to explore genre research and how to put theory into practice. When I first began as a teacher, I taught genres as fixed forms with rigid features. Now I wish to show students the variety and freedom within genres as well as the similarities in rhetorical moves across genres. Most of all, I wish to help them situate all their writing within social and rhetorical contexts and give them opportunities to write for different audiences and purposes. Wolfe et al., Carter, Bawarshi, and others offer helpful methods for growing genre awareness in the classroom, and I intend to adapt these to the unique needs and challenges of my students. I look forward to adapting Bawarshi’s genre analysis for my university-level students, paired with Wolfe et al.’s helpful CGA method. There is more research and work to be done in order to assess genre analysis methods and to determine which methods foster the greatest transfer to new rhetorical situations.

Nevertheless, genre analysis and awareness have the ability to empower students' writing as social action and foster their knowledge of independent rhetorical decision-making.

APPENDIX A

Writing-Intensive Course Faculty Interview Protocol

Introductions and thank you for participating

My name is Emily Staudt, and I am a Graduate Student researching WI faculty conceptions of genre. I am interested in learning more about the assignments WI faculty choose for their courses, why they make those choices, and to what extent an understanding of genre influences them.

Confidentiality

The Institutional Review Board has approved this study, and we will be coding names for confidentiality in any resulting presentations or publications. No one but you and I will know about your involvement in our study or how you responded to the questions I ask today. Please take a moment to read over the consent form, and if you agree, you can verbalize your consent for the tape recorder by spelling your first and last name.

Tape recording – Verbal consent for tape recording; ask the person to spell their first and last name for the tape.

Content of Interview

1. We'd like to start with some demographic basics:
 - a. Your department/unit?
 - b. How long have you been at Mason?
 - c. What positions have you held since arriving?
 - d. What classes in your department/program/unit currently meet the WI requirement?
 - e. Do you now teach the WI-Course?

2. What type of writing assignments (assignments in which students produce writing and submit it for your grading or feedback) do you include in your WI-course? Why?

3. How and why did you choose these assignments in particular (in reference to the 1 or 2 specific assignment artifacts we examine)? How would you describe the purpose and goal of this assignment?

4. How would you define genre?

5. Tell me about the most frequent genres you write in as a professional within your discipline.
6. Tell me about the most frequent genres you teach to your students.
7. To what extent does an understanding of writing in your discipline affect your design of writing assignments for your WI course? How so?
8. Would you be willing to share your syllabus and one or two writing assignment prompts from you WI course with us?

Conclusion:

Thank you for your time. I will follow-up over email with questions, etc.

Overall themes: genre (defined and in practice), writing in the discipline, discipline and genre awareness, writing assignments.

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BIOGRAPHY

Emily R C Staudt received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Grove City College. She was then employed as a teacher in Culpeper County for five years. Upon completion of this thesis, she received her Master of Arts in English with a concentration in Teaching Writing and Literature. While a student at George Mason, she worked as a graduate research assistant for WAC and taught first-year composition. She will join the PhD program in Writing and Rhetoric at Mason in Spring 2018.