# Defining 'Good' Academic Writing

## Abstract

It is suggested that in many writing classes, the pedagogy can be somewhat generic, focusing mostly on the basics of essay writing, while simultaneously being somewhat narrow, in that composition textbooks often default to a style of writing more common within the discipline of literature. This article therefore discusses the results of several studies which analyze differences in writing conventions across several disciplines. Ultimately, the argument is made that, as the writing class serves to prepare students for their future academic writing needs, it is subsequently imperative to teach students discipline-specific writing conventions, in order to make them aware of what 'good' writing means *beyond* the writing class.

## Introduction

The main goal of the Freshman Composition class is undoubtedly to prepare students for the demands of their future academic essay assignments. This preparation is facilitated by teaching students the conventions of academic writing, such as unity and coherence, correct referencing and avoidance of some of the more common grammatical errors, such as run-on sentences. This instruction can indeed help students to achieve good scores within their future academic writing. However, this article addresses two suggested weaknesses within the Freshman Composition class (and college-level writing classes in general).

First, the writing class is arguably both too narrow and too broad in its approach to writing pedagogy. Narrow in the sense that writing classes belong to the English department, with literature often seen as synonymous with English. The point here is that literature has its own specific conventions for what might be considered 'good' academic writing style, and many writing textbooks tend to favor a style of writing perhaps better suited to literary academic writing, such as advocating the use of figures of speech. Within a typical writing class, however, there may be many different academic majors represented, each with their own writing needs. In other words, what might be considered good style within the English department may not be regarded in the same manner in, say, the science department.

Secondly, "the teaching of academic writing usually adopts a generic approach," thereby ignoring "contexts, participants and practices" (Lillis 22). Moreover, Gimenez argues that "writing lecturers appear to focus on the basic principles of writing" (152),

such as structuring and referencing, thus ignoring features of writing which are specific to individual disciplines. Gimenez further states that the essay is usually taught as a generic skill in the 'general' writing class' and "when reports, memos or presentations are taught as universal genres, students from different disciplines need to ultimately adapt them to meet their own discipline-specific needs" (152). In this sense, the writing class simultaneously approaches the subject from a broad perspective, which is equally impractical in terms of helping students to understand discipline-specific writing conventions, which go beyond the basics of essay writing. Therefore, a narrow view taken toward academic writing, via a focus on literary devices more common within literary academic writing, and a broad view, consisting of teaching students essay writing skills based on generic factors, does not effectively take into consideration the different academic writing needs of students.

Secondly, the personal essay, very often used within college writing classes, may not necessarily be an accurate guide for the future writing assignments of college students. The importance of the personal essay, in addition to a stylistics-based approach in academic writing classes, is by no means diminished in this article, however. Instead, it is argued that a greater balance is needed. This balance can be achieved by better preparing students for the demands of academic writing within their own disciplines.

The article seeks to address these issues by discussing what previous research has been able to tell us about how academic writing style differs within various disciplines, in addition to offering suggestions for how different majors within a writing class can be better prepared to write good essays within their own disciplines.

**A Stylistics-Based Approach to Teaching Academic Writing**

O'Brien and Carter discuss how since the mid-1980s, language based approaches have become more common, particularly in the United Kingdom. Ellis and Sinclair concur with a language based classroom approach which utilizes literary analysis, in particular because of its implications for student autonomy, which is realised by the fact that personal point of view is an integral aspect of literary interpretation. Neman is in agreement that students need to analyse literary texts in order "to enhance their writing" (212) and lists a great many figures of speech such as irony, inversion and parallelism that students can become acquainted with following such analysis. Neman further states that the analysis of quality literary texts means that

the "material comes alive for our students when we teach it as a way of enhancing particular essays" (213).

Language-based approaches such as this are "**student-centred, activity-based** and **process-oriented**" (original emphasis) (Carter 3) and it is from analysis of texts that the pragmatic area of discourse stylistics derives, in which students can understand how rhetorical devices are used within a variety of contexts, to include literature. This understanding can then be passed on to their academic composition. The advantages of such an approach are that students' critical thinking skills are strengthened, in part by 'decoding', for example, poetic texts, and a systematic analysis of literary devices reaffirms "the centrality of language as the aesthetic medium" (Carter 6).

Furthermore, professional academic writers also rely on literary devices such as figures of speech to enliven their writing. The text samples below demonstrate this, all deriving from the academic journal *English Today*:

(1a) London today is an enormous *Tower of Babel*.

(2a) *The axe split two ways:* half of us against the death penalty, half for it.

(3a) To really make this notion of *'customer-friendly multilingualism'* work...

Examples (1) and (3) derive from Reinier Salverda's (17, 21) publication entitled 'Multilingualism in Metropolitan London', with example (1) involving metaphorical usage (*Tower of Babel*) and example (3) using a coined phrase (*customer-friendly multilingualism*), hence the use of quotation marks, which, according to Ivanic, are a means by which writers can "signal ownership" (141). Example (2) is from 'Death Sentences' by Bob Blaisdell (44) and involves another metaphor (*axe*). If we consider, however, the above examples written in what some might argue to be a more 'academic' manner, what Halliday refers to as a 'congruent' style, then potential results may include the following:

(1b) London today has enormous *linguistic diversity*.

(2b) There was *great disagreement* in the class...

(3b) To really make *multilingual services work for customers*...

While the three examples above are professionally written, it is argued that examples (1a) – (1c) are by no means less professional based on their use of figures of speech, which perhaps sound more interesting than their more 'academic' sounding counterparts, context permitting.

This brief discussion regarding stylistics, such as poetry analysis as a means to instruct students in figures of speech has been provided, then, to show that the author is in agreement with such an approach used within the composition class. However, the argument put forward here is that students need to be made aware of how academic writing conventions differ from one discipline to the next. Regarding the use of figures of speech, for example, the following quotation suggests that not all disciplines rely, at least not to any significant extent, on such rhetorical devices "Psychology writing is formal scientific writing that is plain and straightforward. Literary devices such as metaphors, alliteration, or anecdotes are not appropriate for writing in psychology" (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/670/01/). This illustrates the impracticalities of stressing to students, through lecture and/or assigned reading from writing textbooks, the need for literary flair in their essays. Forché and Gerard use the term "creative nonfiction" (4) to describe a writing style within academic essays which is "at once factual and literary" (4), but does this *generally* describe academic writing?

If students analyse texts in order to become familiar with literary devices, then it is suggested that analysis of academic essays from a variety of disciplines can help them to understand how style is interpreted in various disciplines other than English. In the absence of textbooks which instruct students in academic writing within the science department or the history department, analysis of essays from several academic disciplines might be an effective means to instruct a variety of academic majors in the ways of good writing from a more relevant point of view.

According to Wyrick, good academic writing style consists of many aspects, a few of which include constructing sentences that are concise, clear in meaning and avoiding misplaced modifiers. Such advice arguably helps to create good academic writing style, regardless of the discipline in which one is writing. Wyrick also exhorts composition students to create a style within their academic writing that "should excite, intrigue and charm" (136). Such advice can be seen with the recommendations to adjust word order, for example, as a means to emphasise words within a sentence. A hypothetical example offered by Wyrick is seen with the construction *wise are the parents who give their children both roots and wings* (as opposed to *parents who give their children both roots and wings are wise*) (213).

Likewise, Neman discusses inversion with the example taken from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: *but her fair hair was girlish: and girlish and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty her face* (213). The issue here is that such advice, and the examples provided, seems more suited for literary writing, arguably due

to the fact that English students, having analysed a great deal of creative writing (e.g. fiction) as part of their essay assignments, are perhaps more expected to produce such a style within their academic writing. Wyrick further instructs students to enliven their writing with figurative language, using examples such as *an hour away from him felt like a month in the country* and *the women's earrings were as big as butter plates* (167). Sentences such as these arguably sound as if deriving from fiction, which, with the exception of creative writing majors, is not the kind of writing that will be expected in most, if not all, academic disciplines. Clearly, the previous directive from Ivanic to write essays which "excite, intrigue and charm" is not necessarily wise, in particular as it may place undue stress on novice writers, having been led to believe that a catchy turn of phrase or well-placed witticism is what their teacher is looking for, when broader concerns are more likely to be the teacher's main focus instead (e.g. essay structure and focus).

One specific example regarding how style is interpreted in the writing of literature majors is the general tendency to use present tense verbs, whereas in many disciplines, past tense might be favored (e.g. such as when discussing the results of a case study, very common in the social sciences). Therefore, while the constructed example below is not 'wrong' from a syntactic point of view, it nonetheless represents a pragmatic error:

(4a) Othello was deceived by Iago, because he gave him too much trust.

The example above would be more in keeping with literary writing if written as follows:

(4b) Othello is deceived by Iago, because he gives him too much trust.

The use of present tense in this manner is therefore a specific linguistic feature associated with the literature department, used as a means to rhetorically communicate that literature still has modern, present-day relevance. Present tense is also common within science writing when discussing facts, such as *the sun rises in the east* and *water expands at 4 degrees Celsius*. These are examples of discipline-specific features that students can be made aware of.

The fact that a great many examples of stylistic devices in writing textbooks derive from fiction can further give the impression that such style is to be strived for

within academic writing *in general*, when in fact it may not be expected at all, depending on one's discipline. Therefore, it again needs to be pointed out that more is needed to teach students the kinds of writing that will be expected of them in their future essay assignments. Once again, analysis of essay samples from a variety of disciplines, even introductory paragraphs, can help students to understand good writing from a more relevant perspective. While concepts such as unity and coherence are to be expected within academic writing *in toto*, how the word 'style' is translated can only really be seen by analysing essay samples, if not complete essays, from different disciplines.

Lillis describes academic writing as mysterious and likens it to a game. Berkenkotter and Huckin further describe teaching students knowledge of the (discipline-specific) academic writing style as analogous to letting "students in on our secrets" (188). This effectively summarise the fact that there are indeed specific ways to communicate one's knowledge within academic writing, and students need to be made aware of this, as opposed to being taught academic writing from both a more generic, and narrow, perspective.

**The Personal Essay**

The personal essay is often included within the assessed work of Freshman Composition, very much a part of the process approach to writing, which involves activities designed to foster personal expression and creativity, such as freewriting and journal writing. Smith discusses the importance of the personal essay as a "warm-up" (23) of sorts to more traditional essays (e.g. those not written on a personal subject). Smith further states that there is a need to "sequence" (27) the essay assignments from relatively easy to progressively more challenging, meaning that a personal essay can be useful as a means to begin the writing process for students. She suggests hypothetical topics for the composition teacher to distribute to students, such as 'describe a phase in your life that changed you in some significant way' and 'describe a brief incident in your life that changed you in some important way'. Furthermore, Bizzell states that "personal-style essays still enjoy an edge" (25). Ultimately, a personal essay might be seen as a chance for students to simply practice the act of writing, without undue concern, initially at least, for mechanics, focusing instead on expression.

The personal essay can also serve, however, to mislead students into assuming that a more personal style is generally permissible within academic writing. In the context of an essay on the subject of 'my first summer job', a more personal style is

undoubtedly expected (e.g. with more use of the first person), but it is difficult to ascertain in which contexts such a personal essay will be used *outside* the writing class. In fact, even within the context of a personal essay within a writing class, students sometimes misunderstand to what extent personal expression is acceptable. Following the attacks of 9-11, a previous student wrote an essay in which he described Arabs as 'towelheads' and 'these bastards'. Such 'personal expression' might have arguably helped him to vent his anger at the time, but we must not forget that a personal essay is still a personal *academic* essay and therefore, the racist language as used in the student's essay, is unacceptable.

As a composition teacher, the author has read essays on inherently personal, if not private subjects, such as divorce and a student's discrimination based on her homosexuality, in addition to finding more narrow features in such essays, such as more use of first person and an occasionally informal style. Samples from previous students' personal essays now follow, in which this personal style can be seen. Though these are well written essays, the implication is that they may have little relevance outside the composition class:

(5)     Just when it seemed safe to play basketball again, my back started to act up. It was something that had been ignored but now the pain was unbearable. The issue could no longer be avoided. *Back to the doctors I went.*

Example (5) demonstrates an informal expression consisting of the phrasal verb *act up* (a more 'academic' lexical choice might have been *ache* instead) and there is inversion in the last sentence. The inversion sounds more effective than standard word order, perhaps because the word order used (OSV) suggests a more 'poetic' style (e.g. *it is you I love*), though the situation described is anything but poetic, thus implying a degree of irony. This is clever writing and in turn might suggest a link between a stylistics-based approach to writing and the personal essay, as the personal essay may include more rhetorical devices gleaned from literary analysis, with which to express one's personal views.

Inversion *per se* is not necessarily off limits in other academic disciplines, though used in such a personal context as seen above again begs the question as to what extent such personal experience, offered within future non-personal essays (i.e. essays not written on a personal subject as such) is acceptable or not. For example, it seems

somewhat unlikely that a medical student would be encouraged to include the information seen in example (5) if writing an essay on back injuries.

Another example follows, taken from a student's essay which discusses mental illness:

> (6)    Imagine you and your mother sitting in the living room. She begins talking while you are concentrating on watching a television program. You stand up to get refreshment out of the refrigerator in the kitchen. Meanwhile, you can still hear her talking, seldom asking questions, answering and laughing. Finally, you sit back on the couch while she continues to carry on a full conversation, in which you have not spoken one word.

Example (6) comprises a portion of the introduction of the student's essay. Again, this is suggested to be an example of good writing, especially as a means to initially 'hook' the reader with the opening sentences. However, outside the context of a personal essay and the composition class as a whole, there are two issues which arise. First, the writer chose to write about mental illness and incorporated a great deal of personal experience based on her mother's schizophrenia. Assuming that she were writing an essay on mental illness in a different context (e.g. a more *de*personalised essay in the medical department), would the personal experience be considered valid, or simply too personal to remain objective?

Second, the use of second person is also suggested to be unusual within academic writing in general. In the context of a personal essay written within a composition class, however, the rhetorical effect of second person is to engage with the readers more, addressing them more directly. Hyland states that "the importance of including readers in written academic texts and engaging them in the unfolding discourse is now well established" (363), further describing *engagement* as a "bundle of rhetorical strategies writers use to recognize the presence of their readers" (364). However, it is uncommon to engage with one's reader(s) in such a direct manner in most academic essay assignments, and the use of second person might even be considered by some teachers to be hyperbolic.

A final example follows, in which a student discusses the differences between high school and university:

(7a)    At today's high school campus you have all the requisite groups firmly in place:–*stoners*, surfers, cheerleaders, *computer nerds* and *jocks*.

The sentence above is the opening to the student's essay and the use of slang (*stoners*) and informal expressions (*jocks*) points once again to a more personal style of writing. Seen in this light, the student's use of language is quite effective, and the expression of 'requisite groups' adds a degree of sarcastic humour. A more 'traditional' manner of communication, however, might be written as follows:

(7b)    At today's high school campus you have several common groups: *drug users*, the surfers, cheerleaders, *computer experts* and *the football players*.

Example (7b) might be more fitting if written for a sociology essay, or, to put it another way, might example (7b) be taken more seriously, by some teachers at least, if it opens a research essay, as opposed to a personal essay in which personal experience is the only 'research' required?

Bizzell points toward a process-centred writing classroom, in which activities such as freewriting can help students "to discover and refine their own personal, authentic writing styles" (113). This is valuable in many ways, as being allowed to write from such a personal perspective has "helped to legitimate voices silenced in the traditional English classroom, voices of women, ethnic minorities, and other oppressed groups" (114). Writing from such a personal perspective can indeed be liberating, but the question must be asked – what implications does relative freedom of style, permissible within a personal essay, have for future essay assignments? According to the style of writing expected in psychology, such personal narrative style has little relevance at all: "Psychology bases its arguments on empirical evidence. Personal examples, narratives, or opinions are not appropriate for psychology" (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/670/01/).

Anson illustrates the problem that can arise when students write from a more personal perspective in a discipline that generally might not allow for such a style, yet nonetheless have a teacher who permits relative freedom of style as a means to develop students' overall expressive abilities. A constructed example of potential feedback as seen in such an essay is written thus: *"I really like the way you've placed yourself at the center of your case study, Peter. You know, of course, that many scientists would*

*insist on a kind of clinical objectivity that your paper resists."* (381). "Clinical objectivity" might seem a fitting description for scientific academic writing, and once students have had practice in self-expression (e.g. through a personal essay), the time is right to then expose them to samples of what more traditional academic writing looks like (e.g. in the example above, this would involve exposure to scientific academic writing).

Therefore, while both a stylistics-based approach to teaching writing and the personal essay are valuable tools in a writing class (and indeed, arguably exhibit a symbiotic relationship), we need to further students' knowledge of academic writing based on additional contextual factors. Approaches to teaching writing which focus on stylistics and more personal writing outlets can complement later study within the writing class which then delves into more traditional writing needs, to include writing within one's academic major. This overall manner of instruction can help students to initially get to grips with the act of writing, discover their own personal expression and ultimately, learn the writing norms of their own discipline.

## Academic Writing in Different Communities

One way to consider the act of writing in different disciplines is to regard each discipline as its own discourse community. Selzer uses the term discourse community to refer to the communication environment in which one is writing. Swales (24 - 27) further discusses the components of a discourse community, considering it to be comprised of several factors, such as an agreed set of public goals (e.g. the reporting of one's research, to further knowledge, to gain external funding); communication mechanisms to provide feedback to each other (e.g. written feedback on essays, conferencing with students, supervisory meetings); specific lexis (e.g. *iambic pentameter* is commonly used by literature students) and finally, a ratio between experienced insiders and novices. The final point can be seen in the ways in which teachers help students to acquire knowledge in their field, through lectures as well as in terms of how to write for the discipline.

Hoadley-Maidment states that learning the rules of one's community (to include how to write academic essays) "is an essential task for students as they are acculturated into the academic community" (57), with Charles reiterating this statement in the following manner: students need to learn ways to build knowledge that is "appropriate both for their specific purposes and within their disciplinary community" (18). As Woodward-Kron (2004:140) states, "without adequate means of conceptualizing a

discourse community, academic writing teachers ...risk making connections and generalizations about student writing that may be inaccurate and misleading for specific disciplinary contexts".

From this starting point, the next question, and arguably the most relevant, is what are the linguistic implications for essay writing in different disciplines? For example, might some disciplines proscribe use of first person and encourage passives, while others encourage the opposite? In order to investigate this area, Hyland focuses on the genre of the research paper (common to a great many academic disicplines) from the point of view of the ways in which metadicourse is used in twenty eight research articles in four different disciplines: microbiology, marketing, astrophysics and applied linguistics. He regards metadiscourse as the manner in which writers attempt "to negotiate academic knowledge in ways that are meaningful and appropriate to a particular disciplinary community" (440).

Differences between the writing within the four disciplines are seen in the frequency of use of the following metadicourse (by no means an exhaustive list): hegdes (e.g. *might, perhaps, possible*), attitude markers (e.g. *surprisingly, I agree, X claims*) and person markers (*I, we, my, mine, our*).

## 1 Metadiscourse in Academic Disciplines per 1000 words

| Category | Biology | Astrophysics | Applied Linguistics | Marketing |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hedges | 12.2 | 9.9 | 15.7 | 19.9 |
| Attitude markers | 1.3 | 2.3 | 5.3 | 5.2 |
| Person markers | 2.4 | 5.3 | 2.9 | 4.4 |

Hedges reveal academic modesty or doubt towards one's claims, attitude markers reveal the writer's attitude toward propositional content and person markers show explicit reference to the author. The differences are explained by Hyland by first making the claim that microbiology and astrophysics are "hard-pure" disciplines (448), whereas linguistics and marketing are "soft-pure" (448). The former are "analytical and structuralist, concerned with quantitative knowledge building" (448); the latter are "typically directed towards practical ends and inquiry and often involve showing how human actions influence events" (448).

Linguistically speaking, Hyland believes that these differences can result in more person markers in the soft sciences, as they use first person to create both "a

personal standing in the text.....and acknowledge an audience's need for involvement and negotiation in knowledge making" (449), whereas the hard sciences require "less guidance and author intrusion" (449) as the readership of such papers is made up of individuals engaged in "highly specialized research who can be assumed to have a particular body of understandings to draw on" (449), more so than the "diffuse readership of the soft sciences" (449).

Having said that, there are exceptions, seen in the higher frequency of person markers in the astrophysics essays. Specific contexts in which first person plural was used in these essays was to introduce text frames (*we now explain how and why we used the concept...*) and to introduce research activities (*Hence, our proposed estimation procedure trades off...*). Tarone, Dwyer, Gillette and Icke also discovered that the construction of 'we + active verb' occurred in the writing of two astrophysics journals they had analyzed "at least as frequently as the passive in both articles" (123). They also identified specific contexts in which this construction is generally common, such as indicating a point in the argument (*In this paper we develop the theory of time-dependent disks*, 128) and when citing other research not in contrast to one's own (*And it generalizes Lynden-Bell's (1976) results...*). Their results are somewhat similar with those of Hyland's study in terms of the specific contexts in which a more personal stance in seen in the hard sciences, in this case, astrophysics essays.

A lower frequency of attitude markers in the hard sciences is based on the suggestion that "the authority of the individual...is subordinated to the authority of the text" (Hyland 449) and the information presented is regarded as being written from a collective viewpoint, rather than an individual one. This further suggests a desire on the writer's part to minimise self mention in the hard sciences. Finally, the higher frequency of hedges in the soft disciplines is explained in part to be a result of "the uncertainties of explaining human behaviour" (451), thus relying more on markers to show doubt and/or refrain from making questionable assertions. A study by Dahl also reveals "a tendency for more linguistics claims to be hedged than for economics" (1197).

The mention of hard versus soft disciplines has great relevance for this article, in that much of the literature on discipline-specific writing conventions seems to focus on the hard versus the soft sciences (respetively, chemistry and psychology, for example). More on this will be discussed later in the article.

Further research derives from a study by Samraj, which consists of the analysis of twenty four introductions from masters' theses, with eight thesis introductions represented from each of the following three disciplines: biology, philosophy and

linguistics. With regard to the writing style of the introductions, Samraj specifically focuses on the overall total of first person as seen within all introductions of a given discipline, and reports the following results: There are nine instances of first person usage in the biology introductions, sixty four in philosophy and nineteen in linguistics. Also noteworthy is the way in which the first person is used, with the philosophy students largely using it to present their arguments (e.g. *I will argue that....I argue that...*), whereas in biology, it is used to discuss the results of the study and what research has been carried out (e.g. *I predicted that...I performed DNA fingerprinting*).

The higher frequency of first person within the philosophy introductions suggests that in this discipline, it is common, and acceptable, for students to establish more authorial presence, those from biology less so. Samraj states that the introductions from linguistics "occupy a more central position" (64). It might be suggested that the sciences, in order to maintain a more objective tone, refrain from repeated use of first person, a finding of Hyland's research, whereas the more frequent use of first person in the philosophy introductions is suggested to be based on the fact that, philosophy, as part of the Humanities, involves "concrete experience and reflective observation" (Kolb 238). This may account for the more prominent authorial presence, seen with use of the first person as a linguistic means to clearly state one's position in the unfolding discourse.

Granted, writing students are by definition undergraduates, not graduate students writing a thesis, which is a genre distinct from most of the undergraduates' writing needs. However, differences are nonetheless noted in the case study of Samraj, which might suggest that the undergraduate writing within these three disciplines (biology, philosophy and linguistics) exhibits a similar style. This is arguably the case, as a genre of writing as advanced as a thesis would continue to demonstrate the writing conventions of the discipline from which it derives, as undergraduate students would have been exposed to a great deal of writing in their discipline, and its subsequent writing style, in the first instance.

Based on the results of Samraj's study, it might be said that academic writing could be placed on a continuum, ranging from 'most impersonal' to 'most personal' in terms of the writing styles of various disciplines. Herein, however, lays a potential source of confusion for students, as there appears to be conflicting viewpoints within the literature regarding how much personal stance is permissible within academic writing, in addition to how *im*personal academic writing should be. This viewpoint is

captured in the quotation below, which discusses the presence of self within one's writing:

> Academic writing has traditionally been thought of as a convention-bound monolithic entity that involves distant, convoluted and impersonal prose. However, recent research (e.g., Milton and Hyland [1997]; Hyland [2002]); Ramanathan and Atkinson [1999]) has suggested a growing recognition that there is room for negotiation of identity within academic writing, and thus academic writing need not be totally devoid of a writer's presence. (Tang and Suganthi S23)

Therefore, while it might be suggested from the quotation above that writing students should develop their own personal style in their essay writing, it is a question of understanding how the personal self and the academic self can peacefully co-exist, so that a student can conform to the expectations of writing in his/her discipline, but simultaneously be able to witness his/her unique style in the text. An example of this is taken from the research of Ivanic, in which a student used the term 'cohab-free' to mean 'single' within her sociology essay. The coined expression was not proscribed and the student's use of single quotation marks around the expression is, according to Ivanic, the writer's way of saying, "this is mine, and it's partly me" (151), thus suggesting an 'academically approved' manner of self-revelation.

Going further within the area of a personal versus impersonal stance in writing, Lester references, and concurs with, pedagogic directives to "write your paper with a third person voice that avoids 'I believe' or 'it is my opinion'" (144). Arnaudet and Barrett state that "academic writing aims at being 'objective' in its expression of ideas, and thus tries to avoid specific reference to personal pronouns...your academic writing should indicate this style by eliminating first person pronouns" (73). Carroll summarises the generally accepted conventions of academic writing thus: "traditional academic writing...encourages students to adopt a guise of objectivity" (46).

Ivanic, however, suggests the opposite, declaring that the first person is a linguistic means by which students take responsibility for their ideas, rather than a means to be overly subjective in their writing. She further mentions that 'I' is a way to advance knowledge throughout the essay, revealing the "most powerful authorial presence" (S29). Day exhorts students to "renounce the false modesty of previous generations of scientists" (166) regarding the use of third person pronouns (e.g. *the*

*author believes...*). Furthermore, Clark states that students should "take responsibility for their ideas by using *I* and other personal expressions" (136).

The conflicting advice presented thus far, beginning with the quotation from Tang and Suganthi, is further complicated by the fact it generally references academic writing as a whole, suggesting it to be uniform in how it is written. However, "scholarly discourse is not uniform and monolithic" (Hyland 3). In fact, Becker mentions that "another culture may be only a trip up or down a flight of stairs" (1998: back cover of Swales' book, *Other Floors, Other Voices*), regarding the different academic disciplines with subsequent differences in academic writing conventions. Indeed, while MacDonald declares that within academic writing there are "common features resulting from the academy's focus on learning and knowing" (12), there are also "variations resulting from the differentiated goals and subjects of different parts of the academy" (12).

When therefore considering the differences between academic essays from various disciplines, the first consideration might be the writing genres more commonly used (Gimenez 157), to include case studies, reflective essays and dissertation proposals, some of which are indeed more common in certain academic communities (e.g. case studies are often used in the social sciences,as mentioned previously). It is also wise to then consider the more likely modes of essays (to use Wyrick's term) used in specific disciplines, such as *narration, description, exposition* and *argumentation*. These two considerations could respectively involve a sociology essay on the subject of child abuse, using the genre of a case study whose main purpose is to argue a solution to the problem.

Biber further distinguishes between genre and *text-type.* Text-type refers to the linguistic forms found within a given piece of writing, therefore referring to internal criteria which serve to distinguish one text type from another. For example, Biber states that a science fiction text belongs to the genre of fiction, yet "it might represent an abstract and technical text type (in terms of its linguistic form), similar to some types of academic exposition and different from most other fictional texts" (70). This means that otherwise unrelated genres can nonetheless display a shared text-type.

The point here is to consider context from a more inclusive perspective. In other words, the text-type of an expository essay in one academic discipline may differ from the text-type of an expository essay within another academic discipline. For example, certain disciplines may prohibit, or at least discourage, the use of first person within an argument essay, while others may not do so within the same essay mode.

The research of Biber is relevant in attempting to answer questions regarding the implications for linguistic usage in discipline-specific writing contexts. His research focuses on the writing found in the following disciplines: *Natural Sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Political Science, Law, and Education, Humanities* and *Technology and Engineering*. Biber's research specifically addresses the following two questions:

1. What are the linguistic dimensions of the various disciplines? 'Linguistic dimension' refers to a certain combination of linguistic features (e.g. nominalizations and passive voice) which together, function to produce a specific rhetorical effect (e.g. abstract writing).
2. How commonly used are various linguistic features in academic essays written in specific disciplines?

For his research, Biber (1988) analyzes 500 academic text samples of about 2,000 words each, with the frequency counts normalised to a text length of 1,000 words. By determining mean scores for the use of each linguistic feature's frequency within a given dimension, an overall mean score is established. The mean scores for various dimensions are reported in the sections that follow.

**The Linguistic Dimension of Involved Writing**

The dimension above refers to the degree in which academic writing is personal in style ('involved'). According to the research of Biber, examples of the linguistic features associated with a more personal style are first and second person. Biber's research found an overall low occurrence of this style of writing within all the academic disciplines in his study. This suggests that the use of second person as seen in example (6) might be inappropriate in many academic essays. The mean score for this dimension within mathematics is the highest, at -4.4, with the natural sciences displaying the lowest score, at -18.2.

This finding might further suggest that broadly speaking, a more personalised style of writing is less common within academic writing (than, say, fiction), but as is the case with the personal essay, fairly common. However, giving students the relative freedom of a personal essay (i.e. in terms of allowing them the choice of subject and to an extent, the style in which the essay is written) does not accurately reflect the writing of a great many future assignments.

An example of the tension between writing in a personal style and in a manner more appropriate to the academic community in general is again provided in the case study of Ivanic, in which she describes how a black British female wanted to use the pronoun 'we' within her sociology essay which focused on black women in Western society; however, she chose to use the pronoun 'they' instead, believing it to be more objective and hence, academically appropriate. Ivanic does not state whether or not the essay's subject was chosen by the student or part of an assigned topic; nor does she provide a definitive answer as to whether or not use of first person plural would have been proscribed within the sociology department. However, this is an example of how individual personal factors (e.g. race and gender) can sometimes collide with those from the academic world, in this case the student's perception that academic writing should be objective. Had the essay, however, been written as a personal essay within a writing class (though admittedly, there is not a British equivalent to Freshman Composition), then presumably the student's desire to use the pronoun 'we' would have been permissible, even encouraged perhaps, as an added means of revealing personal expression.

**The Linguistic Dimension of Narrative Writing**

Narrative writing is best seen in fiction and storytelling in general. According to Biber, such a narrative style of writing is seen, for example, with more use of third person pronouns and past tense. We can imagine how these two features can combine in a piece of fiction:

(8) He walked slowly into the house. He then paused after having heard a ghostly noise.

Past tense is also commonly used in academic writing to discuss the results of one's research (e.g. *the results were recorded after the study took place*) and third person is used to refer to theorists (e.g. *Smith states that.....*). However, the use of past tense and third person pronouns within the dimension of narrative writing points more to the kind of linguistic usage as seen in example (8) – narrative writing in a strict sense (e.g. writing an essay in the narrative mode).

This is also a style which appears with an overall low frequency, with technology/engineering displaying the lowest mean score of -4.1 and medicine the

highest mean score of -1.3. Once again, we can see how the narrative style of essay writing, common within personal essays, is not necessarily a staple of academic writing in general. Arguably, many academic essays are usually argumentative or expository in nature instead.

Below is an example of the more narrative style often found in personal essays, however, taken from a student's essay on the subject of her first kiss:

(9)     Finally my time did come!  I remember it like it was yesterday.  It was Halloween when I was in 8th grade.  Of course I was at Saira's and all her friends were there, including some really cute guys.  I was supposed to be Buffy the Vampire Slayer; let's just say you couldn't see the resemblance but I have to admit I did look pretty.

The style is somewhat informal (*let's just say*) and details events in a narrative manner by recounting an episode in the student's life at a Halloween party. Linguistically speaking, it can be seen how the use of past tense features in this style. Ultimately, the act of 'academic storytelling', as it were, is again more suited to the personal essay, but less so to traditional essay writing. A previous quotation had referenced how narrative writing is inappropriate within psychology writing, for example.  Such different academic writing conventions necessitate the need for a deeper contextual focus in the writing classroom.

**The Linguistic Dimension of Marking Persuasion**

This type of writing is largely focused on making an argument and persuading the reader of one's position. In linguistic terms, it tends to be seen with a higher use of modal verbs such as *will, must, should*, in addition to *if*-clauses. Examples of how these might be used are illustrated below:

(10) It is believed that the results *will* confirm the hypothesis.

(11) For the experiment to be unbiased, attention *must* be given when selecting participants.

(12) There *should* be a margin of error of no more than 3% when calculating the results of the survey.

(13) *If* we assume that the results of the research can be generalized to most, if not all, students, this has implications for the ways in which students

achieve academic success.

Biber's study found that all academic disciplines again had fairly low scores, with the natural sciences displaying the lowest score of -2.1. Politics, however, had a noticeably higher use of this style, with a mean score of 2.6, with Biber attributing this finding to the fact that politics (and also law and education) are more focused on making logical arguments than other disciplines. Therefore, it can be assumed that such essays display a higher frequency of the linguistic features listed above. The fact that natural sciences displayed the lowest frequency of persuasive writing might be because the essays written within this community simply focus less on argument, and more on exposition or even description, such as describing in detail the components of, say, an animal's habitat. Of course, on a narrower contextual level, if writing an argument essay within *any* academic discipline, it is quite likely that the linguistic features discussed above could be more frequently used, as modal verbs can be an effective way to hedge in one's writing, which is arguably good academic writing style for all students to emulate.

Biber further explains the reasons for the different results seen in natural sciences and politics: "Studies that depend on logical development and argumentation, such as political, legal, or philosophical analyses, make considerable use of this style (i.e. persuasive) of argumentation" (194); studies such as the natural and social sciences, however, "depend less on the logical comparison of alternatives and the use of persuasive form" (194).

With further regard to academic writing style within political science, Charles investigates the role of *that*-complement clauses within the writing of eight MPhil theses from political/international science and eight doctoral dissertations from materials science. Specifically, Charles focuses on the frequency of three specific clause types:

Human Subjects          *I believe that...*

Non-Human Subjects      *A solution to the problem dictates that...*

*It*-Subject with Passive    *It is thought that...*

Charles investigates the frequency of clause type per 1000 words and the results are as follows:

**Table 2        Usage of *that*-Complements within Two Disciplines**

| Clause Type | Politics | Materials |
|---|---|---|
| Human Subject | 56.3 | 44.7 |
| Non-Human Subject | 21.1 | 25.3 |
| *It*-Subject with Passive | 4.2 | 16.3 |

It can be seen that there is a higher frequency of the human subject *that*-complement clause within politics. Becher and Trowler state that this is due to how knowledge is constructed in the social sciences, which are usually marked by a more personal style, whereas knowledge construction in the natural sciences is impersonal and objective. Such style of personal knowledge construction could also account for the lower use of *it*-subject with passive construction within politics' essays.

**The Linguistic Dimension of Abstract Writing**

Abstract writing is largely informative and technical in nature and marked by less reference to human agents, such as first person. The linguistic feature largely associated with abstractness is passive voice, both agentless and that which incorporates a *by*-phrase.

**Table 3        Linguistic Dimension of Abstract Writing in Biber's Research** (Frequency counts per 1000 words)

| | Dimension 5: Passives |
|---|---|
| Mean Score for all 7 Communities | 6.2 |
| Education/Law/Pol. Science | 3.7 |

From the results we can clearly see that education (in addition to law and political science) makes less use of passives; to put it another way, writing in education seems to be less abstract. In some disciplines, however, it might be less important to mention who the agent of the sentence is and therefore, a passive sentence is used. Maybe the agent is clearly known, or the object might simply be more relevant, so that

if discussing the results of an experiment, it makes pragmatic sense to place 'the experiment' first in the sentence, as in *the experiment was conducted in the local shopping mall*, as opposed to *I conducted the experiment in the local shopping mall*.

An abstract style of writing is very much associated with the natural sciences (mean score of 8.8) and engineering/technology (mean score of 9.7). The lowest mean score was in the humanities, at just 2.8. Hyland and Tse (2004: 173) state that "interpretations (within the Humanities) are typically more explicit and the criteria for establishing proof less reliable...Self-mention also plays a far more visible role in the soft disciplines". This implies a more personalised style of writing, with the writer's voice and opinions perhaps seen prominently within his/her essays (e.g. using first person), hence less reliance on passive voice.

The higher scores are from communities which have an overall technical subject matter, thus suggesting that mentioning the agent (e.g. 'I') is less relevant and indeed, passive voice is arguably a common feature within scientific academic writing in general, such as chemistry or physics. According to Swales (163), "both past tense and passive are common" within the sciences, though he distinguishes between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences (the former usually thought of as chemistry, physics and the like). He mentions that the soft social sciences (e.g. education) display "an authorial voice and narrative elements" (171), which may suggest less use of nominalizations and passives based on increased use of first person. This in turn concurs with the research of Biber, which suggests a more personal manner of writing in the social sciences.

In a further study conducted by Biber, Conrad and Reppen, sample essays from the history department, part of the social sciences, were analysed in terms of their use of passives, with Biber *et al* stating that history makes "less frequent use of features of impersonal (non-narrative) style" (165) as "history is focused on human events, and many passages concentrate on people or social groups" (165). Furthermore, a higher frequency of narrative features was found within the history essays, such as "past tense verbs, third-person pronouns (and) perfect aspect verbs" (160). MacDonald states that within her own writing samples from the history and literature departments, there is a "comparatively less nominalized style" (174).

Below is an example of academic writing taken from within the school of education, at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. Here a more personal tone can indeed be seen, but for education, no less professional. In fact, the

student received a grade of 'A' for this essay (on the subject of child language development, using a participant named 'Sarah'):

    (14)    I did not have access to a tape recorder thus do not have transcripts of the sessions. During the sessions I recorded field notes, and immediately after each session I used these notes to make a more complex post-session diary (in the Appendices). I concentrated on writing down what she could do very well, and what mistakes she made reading and writing. Before starting I briefed the parents, and I asked Sarah whether she would mind helping me with my 'university-work'. She was aware that I would use the written work she did in class. I had the permission of both parents to use this data, and I promised confidentiality.

The essay sample seems to strongly suggest that academic writing within the social sciences generally displays a more personal, hence less abstract tone, in that more first person is used, or at least permitted, and less passive voice is seen as a result. The constructed examples below derive from example (14) and demonstrate a more impersonal tone, however, based on deletion of the human agent and replacing it with a nominalization or a passive:

    (15)    During the sessions *the recording* of field notes took place..... (nominalization)
    (16)    During the sessions, field notes *were recorded*. (passive)

By comparing the style of writing seen in the examples above with the original writing seen in example (14), a clearer picture is produced with regard to 'more personal' writing versus 'abstract', largely based on deleting the human agent in the sentence.

However, this article does not seek to overgeneralize, as a more personal style is not necessarily standard within all social science departments (or any academic community for that matter), as the social sciences is a "troublesome group of disciplines" because they involve "a complex array of writing" (Faigley and Hansen 140). The fact that there are several social science departments might imply that each in fact has its own unique writing conventions. Faigley and Hansen briefly illustrate this,

stating, for example, that anthropology essays resemble those of natural scientists and cultural anthropology essays resemble those of literary scholars.

Gerot and Wignell go further in their analysis, focusing on how specific essay modes can be used to achieve the aims of a given discipline, the implication being that the mode of an essay also plays a significant role in the use of linguistic features (and subsequent frequencies). Using essays from the history department, Gerot and Wignell discuss the writing context of history students who are assigned an argument essay, in which case such an essay might display more abstraction and nominalization, as an overall abstract nature may aid in maintaining a more objective tone, a quality perhaps better suited to academic arguments. Thus, the more personalized, narrative tone *generally* associated with history essays, as part of the social sciences, would no longer be quite as relevant.

Regarding the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of a more impersonal style of writing, studies such as Biber, Halliday and MacDonald regard the scientific community as being noted for a prominent nominalization and passive use. MacDonald (173 – 174) states that nominalizations have more use in "compact fields within science" and "the use of passive...is common in the (hard) sciences" (173). Research conducted by Tarone *et al* confirms the "relatively frequent use of the passive form of the verb" (123) within science and technology writing, with Biber stating that the scientific academic community represents "extreme use" (194) of passives, perhaps due to its own technical and abstract nature, not involving "specific participants or events" (194). Gimenez focuses on the academic writing found in midwifery and nursing, largely consisting of genres such as case studies and modes such as argument essays, confirming that their text-types are also marked by an impersonal tone, seen with avoidance of the first person singular (160).

Again, it is impractical to characterise all individual departments within a given community as displaying highly similar text types. However, certain generalizations have been offered in this article for two reasons. First, research conducted indeed states that writing within the hard sciences is more impersonal, whereas writing in the humanities and social sciences is less so, and the author's firsthand knowledge of the preferred writing style in the education and literature departments strongly suggests this to be the case. Second, it is comparatively more practical to discuss academic writing conventions within a given community as opposed to discussing academic writing conventions in general, and in doing so, be *too* general.

**Conclusion**

This article has suggested that a more inclusive pedagogy is needed as a means to clarify good academic writing for students from multiple academic disciplines. This can be facilitated by using a top down approach within the writing class, respectively involving making students aware of academic essay genres more commonly used within specific disciplines (e.g. case studies), common essay modes (e.g. argumentation) and finally, analysing sample essays from several academic disciplines in order that students can better understand the various text types, seen with commonly used linguistic features which produce a specific academic tone (e.g. personal versus impersonal). This approach can help to make students more literate in the act of writing and progress to the writing needs of their discipline with a clearer sense of what is expected.

It is not suggested of course that such an approach is not already undertaken within writing classes; however, it is argued that perhaps more needs to be done in this regard, so that students do not leave the writing class with a simultaneously narrow and broad view of academic writing. Narrow in that there is a heavy focus on personal essays, freewriting and literary analysis, broad in the sense that the class teaches academic writing largely based on generic aspects, such as structuring. Both approaches can lead to students subsequently lacking knowledge of how essays within their discipline should be written.

This is not to suggest that writing lecturers should be responsible for identifying the specific academic majors in their class and then producing essay samples from each. It is suggested that analyzing sample essays (or sections of essays) from perhaps four to six academic disciplines is sufficient. Therefore, even if each academic major is not represented in terms of essay analysis, students can nonetheless receive food for thought regarding their individual writing needs.

In addition, students need not be inundated with a plethora of terms regarding linguistic features (e.g. *that*-complements, nominalizations, passives), as such instruction is perhaps better suited to a pure grammar or linguistics class. Students, should, however, be aware of how various linguistic features work in terms of *the rhetorical effects they produce* (e.g. the use of passive voice to produce an abstract and impersonal tone) and to what extent such effects are valued and expected in the writing of a given academic discipline.

Exposing students to the writing of several disciplines, however, also means that they can see how certain components of academic writing taught in the writing class do

not change from one discipline to the other. Therefore, when analysing essays from science and literature, for example, students can learn discourse specific features, as they simultaneously learn that unity, coherence and Standard English are employed throughout both essays.

Anson also advocates the need for instruction in academic writing based on "discipline-specific norms and standards" (381), considering the role of the teacher as a "gatekeeper" (381), which involves teaching students how to write essays based on the norms of a given discipline. Bizzell offers a similar solution, in that she discusses the need for more expressive writing outlets as an initiation into teaching students writing skills, which then leads to a focus on producing finished academic essays. Moreover, she cites the work of writing across the curriculum, a pedagogical movement which started in Great Britain in the 1960s and which sought to teach "how to integrate expressive writing into a wide range of academic disciplines" (121). This suggests once again that a balanced perspective is needed in the writing class and further, that the possibilities for personal expression afforded to personal essays can help students to discover how to develop their own unique writing style, providing it is not proscribed, in the writing of their own academic discipline.

Gimenez goes a step further, arguing for "the clear need for academic writing in higher education to become more discipline-specific" (162), in order for students from a variety of majors to be better equipped to write the "expected standard" (162). With an incorporation of discipline-specific writing conventions, the writing class can become more conducive to students' writing needs, and thus help to produce more proficient writers based on how 'proficient' is defined within a variety of academic disciplines.

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