

Genre Analysis & Reverse Outlining – Vidcast Transcript

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Hi, everyone! This is Heather from the Purdue Writing Lab. In this video, we will be talking about genre analysis and reverse outlining. If you're in the middle of drafting your project, genre analysis and reverse outlining existing sample texts can help you to gain a better understanding of the different components that make up a successful thesis or dissertation in your field. If you're in the revising stage of your project, genre analysis and reverse outlining can help you to locate moments of strengths and growth areas within your project and guide you to better understand where you need to focus your revisions.

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To get started, let's begin with a five-minute writing activity. Think back to a time when you were asked to write a type of document you had never written before. If you need help remembering here, you can think about what you did when you were asked to write your very first teaching philosophy statement, grant proposal, or literature review. What did you do to get started? What steps did you take to learn what to do? If you looked at examples or sample texts, for example, how did you use those models to help you?

Pause the video here and set a five-minute timer for yourself. See you soon!

Welcome back. As we go forward through the rest of the video, continue to think about this activity. Chances are you have already performed some type of genre analysis or reverse outlining in the past, even if you didn't realize that was what you were doing. As we will discuss, both genre analysis and reverse engineering can help you think critically about different types or styles of writing and allow you to examine the different components of these specific styles.

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When talking about genre analysis, it's helpful to break down our terms. If we look at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "genre" is a noun that is defined as a kind, sort, or style. Additionally, "genre" can be understood as a particular style or category of works of art, especially a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose.

When we think about genre in relation to writing, we can understand that different genres of writing are governed by different rules or expectations. For example, texting back and forth with a friend is a genre of writing that is very different the genre of a professional, formal email to a potential employer. Even though both of these styles of

writing include digital correspondence to someone else, the rules and expectations are different in terms of tone and how you are supposed to structure your prose.

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The second component of genre analysis, of course, is the analysis portion. Again, if we look at the OED, “analysis” is defined a detailed examination or study of something so as to determine its nature, structure, or essential features.

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Putting these two words and definitions together, we can understand genre analysis as a way to study or examine a genre or type of writing. It’s helpful to think of genre analysis of a way of reverse engineering a style of writing in the way that it allows us to break apart a style of writing to better understand conventions and expectations for that style and to better use and/or write within that genre.

If we think back to our beginning journaling activity, we can see that genre analysis offers a helpful way to get started when faced with an unfamiliar genre of writing. Presuming we all entered graduate school without already having written a dissertation before, learning how to conduct a genre analysis offers tools to expose the different components of this new, lengthy, somewhat intimidating style of writing. In this way, genre analysis can help us feel more confident and prepared when tackling a new project.

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Let’s take a moment to practice together. Let’s pretend that you were asked to write a CaRS model introduction. Here, “CaRS” stands for “Creating a Research Space,” and this method is often used to help writers create an introduction in STEM-specific academic writing. The CaRS model is made up of three different rhetorical moves to allow the writer to establish the scope and purpose of their project and to make that scope and purpose legible or clear to readers.

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The first rhetorical move is to establish a territory. If we think of the guiding questions of “what,” “when,” and “how,” this rhetorical move establishes the “what,” meaning that it specifies the scope of the writer’s research within their field.

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The second rhetorical move in the CarS Model establishes the writer’s position. It addresses *why* the writer is attending to this research project and why that research is

important or necessary within the field.

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The third and final rhetorical move within the CaRS Model is to occupy a position. This allows the writer to address their argument and how, specifically, they will work to fill in or address existing gaps within their field.

If you had never written a CaRS Model introduction before, you could use genre analysis to identify these three rhetorical moves in a sample text before replicating those moves in your own writing.

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Let's look at an example. Pause the video here and set at least a five-minute timer for yourself. Read through this sample CaRS Model introduction and try to identify the different components making up this paragraph. What moves are the author making, and where, specifically, do you see these moves being represented?

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Here, I have split up the three different rhetorical moves. In the first portion in blue, I can see that the writer is establishing their research territory (i.e. the "what" of their research). In the next section in pink, I see the writer establishing their position (i.e. the "why" of their research).

Finally, in yellow, I can see the writer's move to establish the "how" of their project by stating their position.

If I were asked to write a CaRS Model introduction for the first time, I could look at this example and, after cataloging these different parts of this type of introduction, I could use this example to help me organize my own CaRS Model introduction.

If you need help making connections between this example and your own project, remember that it's okay to not inherently or instinctively know how to organize your thesis or dissertation.

We're all learning! If you need help organizing your literature review or methods section etc., look at examples. Study them. Break them apart. Use your critical thinking skill to identify common patterns within your field and use what you find to help guide your own writing process.

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As we've established, genre analysis is meant to help you uncover the different components of a genre. More specifically, conducting a genre analysis reveals the purpose, target audience, and common structure or organization of a specific type of writing.

We can approach this type of investigation in two ways. First, we can analyze a document on a global level, meaning that we can study the macro-level or big picture elements of the text. The key concern is to understand the big-picture moves that are being made throughout the document and how these decisions shape the writer's argument.

Here are some specific questions you can consider while analyzing a document for global level concerns:

- What is the thesis? Where is the thesis located? What expectations does the thesis set up, how does the text deliver on those expectations?
- How does the text consider and engage with its target and audience?
- How is the text organized, and how does its structure guide and support the thesis?
- What evidence is used, and how is evidence used?

In addition to global level analysis, genre analysis reminds us to consider local level concerns. Here, we can think about the micro-level or more nuanced-level elements of sentence-level writing.

Here are some questions to consider on the local level:

- How are a majority of sentences structured and connected within the document?
- What types of words or phrases are being used?
- Is the writer "hedging"? To what degree?
 - As a reminder, hedging is the degree to which a writer communicates certainty
 - If someone is hedging their point, they tend to be more vague
- What verb tenses are used?
- Is passive or active voice being used?
- How concise is the writing?

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Let's pause here and practice. Begin by reading this paragraph while looking for global-level concerns. What is happening here in the big picture?

Next, study this paragraph for local-level elements. What is happening here on a micro-level?

Pause the video here and set a brief timer—maybe two to three minutes—for yourself. Feel free to take more time if you need. See you soon!

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Here is my example of how I annotated this abstract to analyze this text on a global level. I have coded the different subsections within this paragraph to identify where and how the writer is establishing their audience, what evidence they are drawing from, and the main thesis of their work. If I were tasked to write an abstract for my own writing, I could use these global-level notes to better understand a starting point for my own work.

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In this slide, I have drawn attention to the writer's use of active voice and style of word choice. I noted that the author uses a variety of sentence lengths and structures to create a sense of momentum in their writing, and, in the bottom righthand corner of the screen, I also outlined some of the general argument structures the author uses. From this local-level analysis, I could go forward to better shape my own sentences and word choice in my own abstract.

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So far, we've talked about genre analysis and how it can help you understand the components of a type or genre of writing that feels unfamiliar to you. Before we end this presentation, I want to also offer a few quick notes about Reverse Outlining and how this sort of exercise can help you revise your writing.

While genre analysis often helps you to analyze an existing piece of someone else's writing, reverse outlining can help you to reflect on your own writing in a critical way.

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I'm sure many of us have written an outline to jumpstart their writing process. Outlines are a great way to organize your thoughts *before* you start writing.

Reverse outlining, on the other hand, is a helpful revision tool that you can use *after* you have completed your draft. Have you ever tried to revise your work and felt stumped about where to start? This is a great tool to use if you want to better understand your document's organization and to create some tangible steps for revision based on those observations.

Reverse outlining is a great way to evaluate the big picture of your writing and to

highlight how (or if) each of your paragraphs support your argument. This revision tool can help you lift your attention beyond simple sentence-level details so you can evaluate the strengths and growth areas of your writing on a broader level.

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Here is an example of a reverse outline. Reverse outlining allows you to accomplish two main goals. First, you can summarize what each paragraph is *saying* by summarizing the content of each paragraph. This can help you better picture if and how you need to play around with your document's organization. Are you moving from point to point in a logical way? Are all of your points connected back to your argument, or is there any content that doesn't quite belong?

Second, reverse outlining helps you to understand what each paragraph is *doing* for your overall argument. Where are you defending the significance of your project? Where are you defining your terms to help maintain clarity?

When I make my annotations about what my document is "saying" and "doing," I sometimes find it helpful to print my work and make handwritten annotations, but you are, of course, welcome to use commenting tools to create electronic annotations. As you can see, I used the left-hand margin to make notes about each paragraph is *saying*, meaning that I made notes about the literal content of these two paragraphs. On the right-hand margin, I made annotations about what each paragraph is *doing* for the overall argument.

After you've created your reverse outline, you can start to locate some strengths and growth areas of your project and identify manageable points of revision.

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Now it's time to practice! I realize we might be running a little short on time for this session, so I encourage each of you to practice reverse outlining the next time you work on revising your project. For now, choose even just one or two paragraphs from your own work or from one of your sources.

Annotate each paragraph, making notes about what each paragraph is *saying* and *doing*. It's helpful to limit your annotations to about 5 to 10 words each. It can also be helpful to write your main argument or purpose for that particular section at the top of the page or on a post-it note that you can stick on your computer. This is a helpful way to keep your thesis in mind as you evaluate how well your paragraphs support your argument.

Best of luck revising, everyone! We can do this!

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We've made it to the end of our presentation on genre analysis and reverse outlining. I know we've covered a lot today, but I hope these tools help you whether you're in the process of drafting or revising.

Thank you for learning with me! I look forward to chatting more about revisions with you.

Happy writing and revising, everyone.

Until next time...

