

Writing is Discipline Specific Transcript

Slide 1:

Hello. Welcome to the fourth vidcast in the Purdue Writing Lab's Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. Today we are going to talk about how writing is discipline-specific.

Sometimes when we think about writing, we think about the things that seem the same, no matter what we are writing--grammatical sentences, paragraph divisions, etc. It's true that many aspects of good writing transfer between different genres and audiences. It's also true that different academic disciplines approach good writing in different ways. Today we are going to look briefly at the context of graduate writing and then focus on how you can go about identifying what some of those disciplinary differences are.

Slide 2:

When we think of **undergraduate** writing assignments, we often think of course papers or presentations or maybe lab reports. However, research has shown that, for many students, undergraduate writing assignments primarily involve short-answer exams. Check out the citation for more information on this research.

In addition, the audience for such assignments is usually the examiner (the professor), and the purpose of the assignment is for the student to prove acquisition of knowledge. If you've already watched our first vidcast, Writing is a Scholarly Conversation, you can probably see where I'm going with this. In comparison to graduate writing, undergraduate writing tends to be limited: a limited number of assignments, in limited genres, of a limited length, for a limited audience and a limited purpose, written over a limited time.

Slide 3:

In contrast, graduate school involves almost continuous writing in a wide range of genres. The table on the slide divides up some of the most common forms of graduate writing into four categories: Academic writing, scholarly writing, professional writing, and job market writing. The table is adapted from material presented by Christine Feak, a writing scholar, and is available in this format in the [Writing Lab's Faculty Guide for working with graduate writers](#).

You can see that as a graduate student you'll be doing quite a bit more writing than most undergraduates, and you'll be writing in more genres. The projects will be longer in length and often written over a longer time period. The audience may include the general public (as when you write a newsletter entry), scholars generally (as when you write a grant application), and scholars within your particular field (as when you write a dissertation). In many cases, the purpose will be to join the scholarly conversation of your field, as we talked about in our first vidcast, which means you won't just be proving mastery of the material. You'll be contributing something new.

In order to be successful in joining the conversation and in writing all these varied documents, you'll need an understanding of how writing works within your discipline specifically.

Slide 4:

In order to understand how writing works within your discipline, you'll **also** need to become aware of what your discipline values. One of the reasons why different disciplines have different writing conventions is because what they value in research differs. For instance, STEM fields tend to value recency. Consider, for instance, research on something like electric cars. Using outdated information would be unlikely to produce a safer or more efficient car. Valuing recency can often be seen in citation styles which tend to foreground dates. Contrast this with the citation styles favored by the humanities which tend to foreground author names instead.

Another value might be authorship. Humanities tends to value authorship, so single-authorship of monographs is still quite common in the humanities. STEM and Social Sciences fields are more likely to prefer co-authorship and publishing in journals or conference proceedings rather than books. As one example of how an emphasis on authorship plays out in writing, consider the humanities' emphasis on the use of active rather than passive voice and the prevalence of first person pronoun usage.

As a starting point to understanding disciplinary conventions for **your** field, you'll want to learn what your field values, if you don't already know that information.

Slide 5:

Pause to think about these questions. What does your field value and how does it play out in writing? If you can't immediately answer these questions, identify who you might approach for a conversation about them. What questions will you ask of that person?

Pause the vidcast for 10 minutes to jot down your thoughts.

Welcome back. The rest of our vidcast will look at how you can become familiar with the disciplinary conventions of your field and will suggest what those might look like at the document, paragraph, and sentence level.

Slide 6:

Before we dive into methods for identifying disciplinary conventions, I want to note one **very important** piece of information: Disciplinary conventions can change over time! This is not a circumstance where you can just memorize a list of conventions, and you'll be good to go for the length of your scholarly career. The strategies suggested here today can be applied throughout your entire writing life as a way to keep tabs on shifts in conventions in your field.

Slide 7:

The first place to start when thinking about disciplinary conventions is to focus on clear writing generally. Most disciplines value clear writing, and the things that make writing clear tend to be similar across fields. Gopen & Swan's *The Science of Scientific Writing* is an excellent place to start, even if you are not writing in the sciences. The article provides a crash course in things like reader expectation and the natural stress positions of English sentences, and it offers a short list of structural principles that help with clarity. If you want to go further, this might be a topic to discuss with a writing center consultant or with someone in your institution's English department. Remember the social aspect of writing that we talked about in an earlier vidcast includes talking about writing as writing.

Slide 8:

The second place to look for disciplinary conventions is the submission guidelines pages of journals that you are likely to submit your work to. Sometimes these pages will say something like “use APA style,” but more often there will be some amount of journal-specific information about the writing or formatting of the piece. Comparing these guidelines across journals within your field can be a good way to determine what the field currently values, especially if you find that multiple journals are requesting the same things.

Slide 9:

The third place to look for conventions is in style guides themselves. Most fields prefer a limited number of citation styles--writers in the English department, for instance, probably never use the American Chemical Society Style Guide, while chemists likely don't use MLA format. What you might not yet know is that these style guides often include more than just reference page format. Style guides include information about how to write in a particular style. The APA guide, for instance, includes information about bias-free language and guidance on tone as well as information on using headings, figures, and tables.

Slide 10:

The fourth place to look for conventions is in model texts. Locate some current published pieces in your field that are well-written and use those as a model for your own work. You may want to check with several disciplinary insiders to identify texts that combine both excellent scholarship and excellent writing. Unfortunately, being published doesn't automatically mean a particular piece was also well-written.

Before we talk about how to make use of those model texts, I want to repeat my initial point about identifying disciplinary conventions: Disciplinary conventions can change over time. Paying attention to genre conventions is something you'll do continually throughout your career as a scholar.

Slide 11:

Using model texts to identify disciplinary writing conventions is called “genre analysis.” You might also think of it as a form of reverse engineering. You take an existing sample of the genre in question--a grant proposal, for instance--and you analyze it to see what features are necessary in order for a text to be considered that particular genre. Genre analysis can be a useful tool any time you are tasked with writing an unfamiliar document, but it can also be a good way to pay attention to shifts in disciplinary conventions even in genres with which you are very familiar.

Slide 12:

In a genre analysis, you are looking at what the writer is **doing** as well as what the writer is **saying**. Saying is the content; doing is how the content is communicated. Readers are familiar with looking at content when they read, so you'll need to pay more attention to the doing, to how that content is communicated, when you conduct a genre analysis. For instance, in a certain paragraph, is the author defining terms? Stating a gap? Setting a context?

Slide 13:

A thorough genre analysis of a model text requires that you consider these aspects of doing and saying at the document level, the paragraph level, and the sentence level. For instance, at the document level, you might investigate whether or not the model text uses headers or sub-headers. At the paragraph level

you might determine customary paragraph length or use of topic and transition sentences. At the sentence level, you might notice things like verb tense or use of passive voice.

Slide 14:

As you go through a document, you'll also want to be sure to pay attention to both rhetorical and sentence level aspects of the text. For example, at the rhetorical, or global level, how does the writer indicate purpose or identify the gap that will be addressed? What evidence is used and how is it used? At the sentence level, are direct quotations used? To what degree does the writer hedge claims about the results?

If you would like more information on genre analysis generally, you might check out the [Intensive Writing Experience for Thesis & Dissertation Writers](#) material on the Purdue OWL. In addition, the handout entitled "[Quick Tips for Revising Your Writing](#)" provides revision questions that can also be used to conduct a partial genre analysis of a text, and the handout entitled "[Questions for Conducting Genre Analysis](#)" provides a starting list of rhetorical and sentence-level aspects of writing that you might focus on.

For the next few slides, we'll discuss more information about disciplinary conventions at the document, the paragraph, and the sentence levels. The information presented there will help you think about aspects of writing that you might pay attention to when conducting a genre analysis of a model text, but note that this material is not meant to be a comprehensive list.

Slide 15:

Disciplinary conventions at the document level include such aspects of writing as

Slide 16:

amount of background material that needs to be included,

Slide 17:

overall length of the document,

Slide 18:

citation style,

Slide 19:

And organization and format. We've talked a bit about some of this already. At this point, you might be wishing I could just direct you to a list of the conventions for your particular field. Let me give you an example of why that is difficult.

One objection that is sometimes made about graduate writing is that the writer got stuck in storytelling mode--using simple chronology as a way to explain the research. First this, then this, then that. Scholarly writing requires that the writer shape the material. Writers need to organize it according to the expectations of those who are participating in the particular scholarly conversation.

Slide 20:

For instance, fields in STEM and social sciences tend to use the IMRaD format for their research articles. IMRaD stands for Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion, and you may remember having seen such headers if you've read articles in a STEM or social sciences field. Despite the prevalence of this format, however, **theoretical** pieces in these fields may not possess all of these sections, or even any of them,

Slide 21:

and Jin, Li, and Sun found that economics articles, in particular, often have six **additional** sections. So while something like IMRaD might be a starting point for an organizational structure, you'll want to conduct some genre analysis in your own field to find out just what exactly the expectations are **in your field**.

Remember, the examples provided are not meant to be a complete listing of document-level conventions; they are simply examples to help you understand the wide array of disciplinary conventions that might be possible, because these are often unstated and untaught. And as I've said before, remember that conventions can change over time.

Slide 22:

When you are looking for disciplinary conventions at the paragraph level, you may find yourself investigating things like

Slide 23:

whether, when, or how to use definitions.

Slide 24:

For organizing your material, should you use transition sentences to connect paragraphs or will sub-headers be sufficient signposts for readers?

Slide 25:

And how many examples are necessary to make a point?

These are the types of writing conventions that might vary by discipline at the paragraph level. Let me give you an example of how this can work in actual practice.

Slide 26:

You were probably taught somewhere along the way that a paragraph needs to have a topic sentence. This seems like something that should apply pretty commonly across disciplines, right? But what if you are a writing a literature review, one of the most citation-dense sections of many papers? Can a sentence be a topic sentence if it has a citation in it, or do you need a separate topic sentence that is your "own" idea before diving into all of the literature? This question arose during a writing group that included both social science writers and humanities writers. The humanities group thought that topic sentences should belong to the writer, not the literature and, as such, should not be information that needed to be cited. The social scientists were sure they had seen this use of citations in topic sentences in published articles in their fields.

Again, as I mentioned previously, the list here is not meant to be a complete list of all paragraph level disciplinary conventions, but it gives you an idea of the types of things that might vary by discipline at the paragraph level. You'll want to use genre analysis and perhaps some conversations about writing as writing to identify conventions for your own field.

Slide 27:

Disciplinary conventions at the sentence level include parts of writing that we often think of addressing during a final proofreading

Slide 28:

such as vocabulary or grammar.

For instance, does your field allow the use of first person pronouns and, if so, should they be the singular I or the plural We? Is passive voice tolerated, encouraged, or reviled? Should literature from the field be referred to in the present or past tense?

Slide 29:

You may also want to take a look at sentence **structure** to determine whether particular sentence types--simple, complex, compound--are tolerated or preferred or relegated to only certain portions of the document. There may be a preference for sentences of a certain length or a tendency to avoid certain punctuation such as dashes.

Slide 30:

At the sentence level, you'll likely **also** want to consider more rhetorical aspects of writing such as hedging. If you aren't familiar with hedging, consider my last sentence. "You'll **LIKELY** want to consider." I didn't say you **WILL** want to or you **SHOULD** or you **MUST**. That word "likely" is a hedge; it softened the force of what I was saying and left room for me to not be 100% certain while still being mostly certain. Other hedges include words like "may" or "tend" or even "often." In contrast to "writers do this," "writers **often** do this" leaves an opening for not all writers to do it all the time. When you look at how your discipline hedges, you'll want to pay attention to **which things** need to be hedged **and** to **how strongly** that hedging needs to be. Hedging too strongly is just as problematic within a discipline as not hedging strongly enough.

Slide 31:

I want to end the sentence level portion of our talk with a few words about the frequently vilified passive voice. Passive voice occurs when the object of a verb is made into its subject. The boy threw the ball--active voice; ball is the object. The ball was thrown--passive voice; ball is now the subject. It is entirely possible to have an active voice sentence that does **not** have a human in the subject position. Test vials fractured under the extreme heat--also active voice despite no human being in sight.

You can identify passive voice by looking for the inclusion of a "to be" verb with the main verb--In our ball-throwing example, the active "threw" becomes the passive "WAS thrown." You can also look for it by adding the phrase "by the noun" after the verb--the ball was thrown by the boy. You cannot say "test vials fractured by the boy" as a complete sentence, which is a clue that the sentence is **NOT** a grammatical passive.

There are good reasons to use passive voice, such as if the action is more important than the actor, or, in keeping with our topic today, if your discipline prefers its use. Note that overuse of passive voice can result in lack of clarity, but it is not the **only** cause of unclear prose. So if you receive feedback telling you that you have too much passive voice, you may need to consider revising more than your verbs since the underlying problem might just be lack of clarity generally rather than prevalence of grammatical passive voice specifically.

Before we move on to our final topic, I want to clarify one important point. Some of what we've been talking about here are issues of **style** rather than **correctness**. Style preference can vary by country, discipline, and even individual professor. If a particular point of style is someone's pet peeve, they may very well tell you it is incorrect or poor writing. Paying attention to writing as writing is one way you can identify whether a potential problem is an issue of correctness or simply a stylistic difference. How you choose to address the problem might vary depending on the answer.

Slide 32:

One aspect of writing that is often overlooked when we focus on rhetorical and sentence-level issues is the aspect of "voice." If you think of verbal conversations you've participated in or even just overheard, you'll likely be aware of how voice plays out verbally. The conversation might be loud or soft, the tone of voice might indicate humor or scorn, the words chosen might be formal or informal, etc. A conversation that takes place in writing also possesses voice, although it can be much trickier to identify exactly what qualities we are referring to when we speak of a **writer's** voice. We talked in the Writing is a Conversation vidcast about writing being a scholarly conversation. In order to participate in the conversation in your field, you'll be developing a scholarly voice of your own and will need to become aware of how voice operates within your field of study.

Because it can be difficult to identify exactly what makes a writer sound respected within a particular scholarly conversation, this can be a good place to have verbal conversations with others in your field about writing as writing, as we suggested in the Writing is a Social Endeavor vidcast. You might talk with disciplinary insiders about what it is that a writer does that causes the reader to hear that writer as a legitimate part of that particular scholarly conversation.

Slide 33:

One aspect of writing that contributes to a scholarly voice is the degree of confidence that a writer displays. Note that both overconfidence **and** lack of confidence can result in the writer being perceived as not being a disciplinary insider.

Slide 34:

The use of strategies like self-reference or metadiscourse (where you talk about what you are doing in the writing with phrases such as "we will explain" or "as explained in the previous section") can vary by discipline. Expected or unexpected uses of these strategies can signal insider or outsider status to readers within the field,

Slide 35:

as can degree and appropriateness of engagement with the literature.

It is important to note that readers may or may not realize that, for instance, your apparent overconfidence is the problem they are having with your text. They may just think your writing is not very good.

As you work with model texts and conduct genre analyses, you'll want to look for indicators of voice as well as other rhetorical or sentence-level features. You may also need to ask specifically about this in your verbal conversations about writing as writing: what is considered a scholarly voice in this field and what are the qualities that produce that voice?

Finally, it is also important to note that I am not suggesting that your goal should be to sound exactly like everyone else who is writing within your field. Voice also has an individual component to it, and your writing should be your own. Just be aware that if you have not mastered the disciplinary conventions of your field, including voice, you may not be considered a disciplinary insider for the purposes of publication. You'll want to work with your mentors and perhaps a writing center consultant to find the necessary balance between maintaining your own voice, including dialect and accent, and writing for your particular scholarly audience who have certain expectations about what good writing is.

Slide 36:

I've given you a lot to think about today, and you may be wondering exactly where to start. The slide offers a to-do list for tackling this topic in your own life. You'll want to locate and review the material that we've talked about today and also plan conversations with others in your field. The first step, however, is to make a plan for how you will tackle this to-do list. Who will you talk to? Where will you find the necessary information? When will you do this?

Pause the vidcast for 10 minutes to create a plan for learning about disciplinary conventions within your field.

Slide 37:

As you continue on in your academic career, remember that writing can be discipline-specific. You'll want to continue to notice various rhetorical and sentence-level conventions in the scholarship you read so that you can apply those in your own writing where relevant. Paying careful attention to these features of writing during your own writing process and discussing them with others as part of the social aspect of writing will contribute to your ability to participate fully in the written conversation of your discipline.

Thank you for joining me today. If you are interested in more information about graduate writing, check out the other vidcasts in the Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. If you are further along in your program, you might find [our Intensive Writing Experience for thesis and dissertation writers](#) of use. All materials for that program are available on the Purdue OWL.

Happy Writing, Everyone!