In their preface, Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki ask what is a resoundingly interesting question, one that motivates their entire book: “Could we reach a sound definition of ‘academic writing’”? (v). The interesting nature of that question emerges not only from the obvious complexity of trying to define such a recurrent yet ephemeral phrase, but more so from that fact that such little research exists on a question so imperative to composition and WAC/WID programs. As the authors explain, a cross-curricular workshop with other faculty spurred their desire to research the issue when “the ‘poor’ paper was judged by a plurality of the participants to be the best in the sample” (1). As they theorized, perhaps “academic writing” is not “as stable, unified, and resistant to alternatives” as commonly perceived (2), possibly leaving ample room for alternative discourse within the academy. The question of the nature and permissibility of alternative discourse within academic writing serves as one of the prime focuses of this book.

Thaiss and Zawacki break the issue into two parts, the first concerning the extent to which “academic writing” can be defined, and the second concerning the extent to which “alternative” discourse is embraced. Based at their home institution of George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, the authors’ methodology included interviews with 14 faculty from different disciplines, a survey administered in an advanced writing course to 183 students from different disciplinary majors, six student focus groups, data from 12 interdisciplinary faculty workshops, and “timed essays from 40 undergraduate students from 22 majors” (25). I itemize those elements because the comprehensive nature of the study warrants acknowledgement. While limited to a single institution, the multi-pronged approach lends a depth to the research that contributes to the credibility of their findings.

In an initial effort to define the qualities of “academic writing,” the authors attribute to it three generalizable characteristics. While they note that exceptions can always exist, the characteristics include “persistent, open-minded” study (5), “reason over emotion” (5), and an “imagined reader who is coolly rational” (7). They equally address the definition of the word “discipline,” and in doing so reject notions that it can be categorized on departmental bounds, postulating that “discipline” is a fluid construct.

The second chapter explores faculty descriptions of disciplinarity and writing. At least initially, faculty accounts of good “academic writing” af-
firmed the three characteristics referenced earlier, leading Thaiss and Zawacki to reason cautiously that we can establish some generalized notions of what constitutes acceptable discourse within the academy. As the faculty members’ discussion of disciplinarity deepened, the commonality of characteristics diminished roughly in proportion to the emergence of discipline-specific criteria. However, and this seems essential, faculty members’ specified visions of “academic writing” never exactly contradicted the generalized traits. Instead, their visions referenced the discipline-specific genres through which the three primary characteristics needed to manifest in order to be accepted within the field of study. The picture Thaiss and Zawacki paint, therefore, is not that different disciplines value different things but rather that different disciplines value different, though often similar, expressions of the same things.

The latter half of chapter 2 dealt with the question of alternatives to “academic writing.” On this point, it became clear that even within disciplines and departments, faculty could not agree on exactly what constituted the boundaries for acceptable student writing. What was clear, however, was that while faculty “may themselves write within the conventions of their disciplines, [they] do not necessarily want undergraduates to . . . write within those conventions” (46). Instead, Thaiss and Zawacki report that, at least for many faculty across different disciplines, it is more important that students use writing to find meaningful connections between themselves and the subject matter.

Chapter 3 explores methods the faculty use to teach writing. The authors find that “the common terminology that faculty use often hides basic differences” in expectations because of differing operative definitions within the same lexicon (59). Identifying five distinct ways in which “good writing” is simultaneously valued—ranging from “the academic” to “the idiosyncratic”—the authors postulate that only strong teacher-student interaction will help students negotiate the academic activity system (60). The chapter continues with an exploration of “alternative” writing assignments, which lean either toward personal writing as a way to connect the student with the subject or toward multi-modal writing—hypertext, scripts, letters, etc.—as a means of affording the students varying modes of expression. Chapter 3 concludes with detailed discussion of the process departments at George Mason University invoked to construct rubrics, as well as an analysis of the rubrics themselves. The rubric process began by working with departmental liaisons and continued when the liaisons returned to their departments and led workshops therein. Rubrics across departments showed considerable consistency in what they valued; the hardly uniform, they affirmed earlier discussions about the three general expectations for “academic writing.”

Chapter 4 discusses the students’ perspective on writing in academia. On the whole, students tend to share the same general perspectives as faculty
insofar as a roughly comparable understanding of general “academic writing” expectations. As the authors report, this does not mean that students always achieve those expectations, but it does mean that students are “getting it” (101). Not surprisingly, overall correlations remain high between students’ understanding and faculty expectations, although such correlations diminish as specific disciplinary expectations emerge.

Perhaps the most important portion of the chapter comes in Thaiss and Zawacki’s explication of the three developmental stages of the student writer: [1] The student generalizes the nature of disciplinary writing from a limited body of coursework and writing experiences; [2] the student experiences multiple courses and assignments, and perceives “inconsistency” rather than commonality within the discipline (110); [3] the student comprehends differing expectations as “nuanced” ideas within the same discipline (110). According to the authors, the dominant reason many students never achieve third-stage writing traces back to an insufficient number of writing experiences, an insufficient number of opportunities to reflect on their writing, an insufficiently unified writing program, and insufficient feedback from teachers. Students found teacher feedback particularly valuable and desired, and often more important than the grade itself.

In chapter 5, Thaiss and Zawacki take the information discussed in the previous chapters and apply it toward advice for writing teachers and writing programs, offering key points for moving students from stage one writers to stage three writers. They offer twelve recommended practices for writing educators, ranging from the relatively simple “define expectations clearly” to the more complicated twelfth practice: “Create unified program development in writing that coordinates goals of the composition course(s) with those of courses in majors” (142, 160). Furthermore, the authors go so far as to diagram three models for WAC/WID programs, models whose varied nature should serve a wide range of institutions. The models range from emphasizing first-year composition to emphasizing discipline-specific courses within other academic departments.

If there is a weak aspect to the text, it comes in its supposed emphasis on the question of alternative discourse within the academy. That issue might have motivated the authors but it did not notably bolster the text. The information about alternative discourse is useful but the text did far more to further our understanding of standard “academic discourse” than of “alternative discourse,” the acceptance and presence of the latter being more idiosyncratic than anything else. I think most compositionists, if not academicians on the whole, would expect the “alternative” forms to exist at each instructor’s whim more than through larger acceptance by a department or discourse community—hence the term “alternative.” Similarly, I think most of Thaiss and Zawacki’s conclusions come as little surprise to most compositionists, namely that there are some fairly general and agreed upon
expectations for academic writing overall, and that the level of agreement diminishes as writing recedes deeper into each discipline and department.

While it might seem as though that is a criticism of Thaiss and Zawacki’s work, it is not. To the contrary, the authors finally offer the field of composition some substantive and detailed explication and synthesis of the nature of academic discourse, how it is valued and taught outside composition programs, how students perceive and achieve successful academic writing, and what we can do individually and programmatically to forward written academic discourse. The fact that their study affirms what many of us might have suspected removes the need for guesswork and instead empowers compositionists to approach our campuses and writing within the disciplines with knowledge about what is taking place and how to improve on it.

I hope that the depth of their multi-modal approach will inspire future longitudinal studies of the same nature. Thaiss and Zawacki incorporate faculty interviews, student interviews, analyses of writing samples, focus groups, and surveys, all toward a comprehensive view of what is transpiring with writing in higher education. Clearly, the implications of their work are yet to be realized but it should inform writing programs in higher education for some time to come.

Indiana, Pennsylvania


Reviewed by Kyle Jensen, Illinois State University

Over the past decade, the concept “post-process” has developed a rather notorious reputation in composition studies. Considered by many to advocate a high brow, anti-pedagogical stance that strays from the traditional goals of our field’s research (to say the least), it has met considerable resistance from a host of well-respected scholars such as Susan Miller, Nancy Welch, and Lisa Ede (to name a few). It is with some curiosity, then, that the recently published Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Instructors identifies itself as a “postprocess” anthology that attempts to calibrate new composition instructors to the emerging conversations in our field. Rather than take aim at the limitations of the process model, however, the editors claim to move “beyond process” by collecting some of the past and recent scholarship that theorizes writing as a complex social phenomenon. Drawing upon three new