
Reviewed By Irene L. Clark, California State University

In 1993, I spent three months at the University of Utrecht teaching a course in academic writing to students who were completing PhD work in the field of geography. My students had enjoyed significant academic success and were deeply committed to their chosen field. Most spoke several languages, their English was excellent, and they wanted very much to achieve the stated goal of the course—to write a potentially publishable article in English based on their research. However, when I received the first drafts of their articles, I was surprised and puzzled to note a problem that I didn’t anticipate. The problem had nothing to do with grammatical or syntactical error, word choice, or even the unfamiliar structural strategies characteristic of texts written by English Language Learners. Rather, the problem was exactly the one I encounter each semester in the writing of first year students in the United States and often in the writing of upper division and graduate students as well—there was no main point, no thesis, no unifying theme. Apparently, neither my Dutch nor my American students were aware of the underlying purpose of academic writing—to address an exigence, that is, a defect, an obstacle, a gap, or a problem, on which to base an argument and which would provide focus and unity in the text. Because my Dutch students did not have what in current genre scholarship is referred to as “genre awareness,” their writing consisted primarily of detailed summaries of research presented in no particular order. There was no argument or unifying premise.

It was at that time that I first encountered scholarship concerned with the reconceptualized theory of genre, the work of John Swales and Amy Devitt, in particular, and I found that when I applied insights derived from that theory to my teaching at Utrecht, my students’ writing improved significantly. Since that time, genre theory has been a significant presence in my scholarship and teaching; I have found that when students, both graduate and undergraduate, acquire “genre awareness,” they are able to navigate the expectations of academic writing with success and to approach new genres effectively.

How delighted I am, then, to read Mary Soliday’s slim, but insightful book, Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines, which applies insights from rhetorical genre theory in a WAC context. The book recounts Soliday’s experience at the City College of New York (CCNY), in which doctoral students, called Writing Fellows, were paired with faculty in several disciplines to enable faculty to improve their teaching in general education courses, major courses, and some graduate courses, a related goal
being to enable students to write appropriately in particular disciplinary contexts. Soliday views the concept of genre as a means of helping content professors clarify their own rhetorical understanding and raises what is becoming a seminal WAC oriented question: how can we help students apply what they know about writing across new situations and contexts? Is it possible to do so? In addition, Soliday raises a second equally important question: “What is a good assignment?” She concludes that, “because genre is a social practice, an assignment must be aligned with the social motives the genre performs for readers” (11).

Soliday situates her book within a particular set of experiences associated with the CUNY-Wide WAC Mandate, which implemented a program in which writing fellows worked with faculty in several disciplines: Anthropology, Early Childhood Development, Music Appreciation, Art, and Biology. The book consists of an Introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and an appendix that contains reflective statements by content faculty, attests to the success of the program, and explains the strategies and insights into assignment development that the program enabled them to learn. Chapter 1, titled “Sharing Genre Expertise,” traces how the Writing Fellows worked with the faculty to implement the program, focusing on the useful concept of “teacher talk”—that is, how teachers across disciplines talk about and evaluate student writing as they craft “prompts, guidelines, warnings in class, commentary on papers” (12). Soliday refers to “teacher talk” as a university metagenre, of which successful students are aware when they compose, but which can also be confusing for students, particularly when it contains contradictory instructions, such as when teachers urge students to use their own voices and then caution them to use appropriately formal language. Soliday maintains that confusion in this metagenre is inherent in academic writing, because an expert stance consists of one’s own perspective combined with the words of others, a creative blend that involves a complex understanding that novices to the academy rarely have.

Chapter 2, “Stance in Genre,” considers how writers achieve authority to speak about evidence in university genres. Drawing on interviews, Soliday focuses on the importance of teacher talk in helping students understand what constitutes evidence in a given discipline, noting that academically proficient students were able to fulfill their readers’ expectations by assimilating the teacher’s words, not copying them, achieving the distinction between imitation and typicality that constitutes genre appropriateness. Chapter 3, “Content in Genre,” uses the theory of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger to consider how writers find ideas and facts and turn their material into evidence for readers. It contrasts what researchers know about writing genres in the workplace with the standard teaching of genre across the curriculum.

The strategies and reflections associated with this project are thought-provoking and useful unto themselves. But what I found most important is Soliday’s discussion of transferability—that is, the extent to which generic academic writing, as taught in a first year writing class, can help students
grapple with assignments across the curriculum. This is the conundrum of
genre study, an issue that continues to generate scholarly disagreement (see
in particular, Petraglia’s 1995 collection *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking
Writing Instruction* and Thaiss and Zawacki’s 2006 study *Engaged Writers,
Dynamic Disciplines*). David Russell maintains that general writing instruc-
tion that is not linked to a discipline is like teaching a course in general
ball-handling and then expecting students to be equally proficient in such
varied games as baseball, football, basketball, tennis, and jacks; writing,
Russell emphasizes is situated within activity systems (55). More recently, a
study of a large mid western composition program, conducted by Elizabeth
Wardle, maintains the difficulty of teaching academic writing genres in only
one context (see “‘Mutt Genres’”). Wardle’s study questions the existence
of autonomous writing and the possibility of teaching students transferable
skills, whereas Gerald Graff, in *Clueless in Academe*, maintains that “one
of the most closely guarded secrets that academia unwittingly keeps from
students and everybody else is that all academics, despite their many dif-
fences, play a version of the same game of persuasive argument.” Graff
acknowledges that although each discipline has its own version, each is a
form of what he refers to as “arguespeak” (22).

Soliday, countering Paul Prior’s emphasis on the situatedness of all
writing acts (see *Writing/Disciplinarity*), defines “situation” more broadly,
arguing that writing ability can extend and be taught overtly across con-
texts, at least to a certain extent. Some writers, she argues, can apply some
general writing strategies to local rhetorical situations and contexts. If this
is not the case, then writers are dependent on an apprenticeship model,
which presumes that learning can occur only as a result of immersion in a
particular discipline. Soliday argues that, if we believe that the only way that
students can acquire new genres is for them to pick them up on their own,
without instruction, we may be blocking their access to disciplinary genres.

Soliday uses several research strategies to reach her conclusions, includ-
ing surveys, interviews, and reflective pieces written by both students and
faculty. Citing Lave and Wenger’s book *Situated Learning*, she stresses the
importance of an “apprenticeship model” (Soliday 6), of linking a genre to
social context, and of helping faculty gain awareness of the rhetorical expec-
tations that inform genre within a particular discipline. The book insightfully
applies genre theory to disciplinary practice, urging us “to believe that we
can find a ‘clear path’ to genres rather than just ‘hoping’ students will be able
to find a clear path through trial and error” (105). Soliday’s study, happily,
constitutes a validation of this optimistic perspective.

The concept of genre that informs Soliday’s book has been a consistent
presence in my classroom teaching, as well as in my scholarly work. I have
incorporated it into undergraduate courses, both at the lower and upper
division levels, as well as into my graduate seminars. Graduate students are
particularly grateful for the insight that genre analysis enables, not only in
helping them with their teaching, but also with their own graduate work in
seminars and ultimately, in writing theses. Almost twenty years ago, I found the concept of genre to be helpful for my Dutch students, and I expect that Soliday’s book will demonstrate the value of genre awareness in a variety of WAC contexts.

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Works Cited


Wardle, Elizabeth. “‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?” CCC 60.4 (2009): 765-89. Print.