

Approaching Unfamiliar Genres and Writing Tasks

No matter your major or concentration, when you attend a college or university, you often are asked to write in genres that may be unfamiliar to you. Furthermore, you may not always receive explicit instructions on how to write in new genres. Many college students are expected to learn how to write in a particular discipline gradually, over time. Learning how to write in a new environment, like learning anything new, is a timely process with no quick fix. However, this handout provides you with useful strategies that can be applied in any discipline.

Examine Useful Models

Your professor may have a writing sample from a past student or a scholarly article that resembles the writing you are expected to produce. If they don't, try to find a good model on your own. You can seek the help of a research librarian to locate a peer-review journal in your discipline or a book that discusses writing in that particular field. When looking for models on your own, however, make sure that they are appropriate; don't choose one that is too complex for you to understand. When in doubt, share it with your instructor and ask if they consider it useful. Once you have a good model, read it thoroughly, making note of the following:

- **Structure:** How is the text organized? In what order is the information presented? Are there headings or sections? You may also want to label the function of each paragraph or section, such as “provides background of topic” or “discusses results.”
- **Language/tone:** What type of language is used? Is the tone formal or causal? Are there certain phrases or terms that you can integrate in your own writing? Look for discipline-specific terminology, especially, as this is important to grasp.
- **Format/Conventions:** What type of formatting is required? APA, MLA, etc? Do you need to familiarize yourself with this format? Note especially how the article integrates and cites outside sources. If necessary, consult a formatting handbook.

Be aware of the genre's rhetorical elements

Reading through good models will not only give you a better idea of how to compose a particular genre, but also of the genre's rhetorical elements. That is, the elements which relate to the genre's function, or how it works. In particular, you should always be aware of the following rhetorical elements:

- **Writer Persona:** When we write, we always assume a persona that differs from who we are in real-life. Even when writing an essay that expresses our opinion or recalls a personal experience, we almost never write for school exactly the way we do in other settings. It is important for you to be aware of the persona you must take on when writing a new genre. Are you writing as a student or as if you are already an expert in the field? Are you expected to show great emotion or be more detached? When in doubt, consult with your instructor or note the tone of sample papers in the same genre.
- **Audience:** Most students, when asked who they are writing for, reply “My instructor.” While your instructor is the one who assigned your essay and will be the one grading it, most academic

papers are never intended for just one audience. For which audiences is this genre typically intended? The concept of audience also goes hand-in-hand with writer persona. If you know you are expected to write as an expert in your field, then your intended audience would be fellow scholars. Envisioning a wider audience than your instructor will also help you write a more developed essay since you will include more context and background.

- **Purpose:** Perhaps the most important rhetorical element, purpose or function enables you to write with a sense of direction. Being aware of your purpose also prevents you from drifting away from the topic or including information that is not relevant. For instance, if you are aware that the purpose of your assignment is to interpret the meaning of a poem, you will most likely not just produce a summary of what the poem is about.

Understand the Corresponding Content

It is almost impossible to write a solid essay on a topic, reading or concept that you do not fully understand. When you attempt to write under these conditions, it is apparent to your instructor, or any reader, that you do not have a strong grasp on what should be the essay's content. If your writing assignment is meant to respond to some type of reading, make sure to take the time to critically read and comprehend the text before you begin writing. If your writing assignment is based on a concept learned in class, review your lecture notes or the class textbook. A tip I always give students: once you can clearly explain (verbally) what your essay is going to be about to someone else, you are ready to begin writing.

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