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Connections and Disconnections between Academic Writing Theory and Writing in the Business World

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✓ Connections and Disconnections between Academic Writing Theory
and Writing in the Business World ✓

by

Shannon N. Fanning

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of


Master of Arts

May 2012

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

English Department

Certified by:

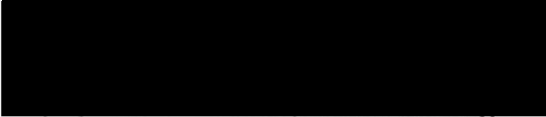

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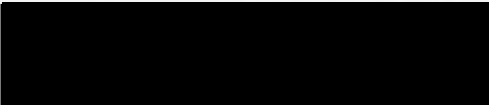
May 2, 2012
Date

Thesis Committee:


Dr. Emily Isaacs
Thesis Sponsor


Dr. Jessica Restaino
Committee Member


Dr. Jonathan Greenberg
Committee Member/
Graduate Program Coordinator


Dr. Daniel Bronson
Department Chair

Abstract:

Although not all college students will become professional writers, many, if not all, will need to learn to write professionally. The ability to write well is an essential skill in any profession, and while few would dispute the importance of being able to write well, the ways in which one's academic writing experiences inform her ability to write successfully in professional settings remain a mystery to many.

My thesis begins with a discussion of attempts made to bridge academic and business writing and a review of the history of efforts made by advocates of professional and workplace writing instruction and their influence on academic writing pedagogies. I then discuss characteristics of successful academic and business writing. After defining the characteristics of successful writing in each of these discourses, I examine the ways in which they are similar and dissimilar. In doing so, I conclude that while there are many writing values that are unique to academic or business contexts, there are also three significant attributes that are shared by these two discourse communities.

CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS BETWEEN ACADEMIC WRITING
THEORY AND WRITING IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

SHANNON N. FANNING

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2012

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1. Introduction

The day I started my first professional job, I sat at a desk armed with instructions to write descriptions of approximately twenty products, a computer, and exactly zero experience doing what had just been asked of me. Somehow, I was able to do it and to do it well. I was able to draw upon my college education in ways that I hadn't even realized that it had benefited me. More specifically, I was able to take my experience writing as part of an academic discourse and apply it to writing as part of a professional one.

While I had no training as a copywriter, the role I was expected to take on, my experience as a communications major had afforded me the opportunity to write for many different audiences, with many different purposes, and as part of different discourses. Instructors regularly created hypothetical scenarios in which my classmates and I were expected to write in any number of roles and with purposes as varied as you can imagine. For example, a public relations professor once gave my classmates and me fifteen minutes to come up with a statement we would release to the press after our company was involved in a disastrous oil spill. Each person shared his or her response, and perhaps even more importantly, the instructor then shared the actual statement he had prepared as a public relations practitioner in what we then learned was not such a hypothetical situation.

This connection with the "real world" was critical. I credit my instructors with being able to simulate a professional environment in the classroom on so many occasions, and I have no doubt that this made my own transition from college to the workforce significantly easier than it might have been otherwise. Additionally, varied assignments

regularly asked me to consider different audiences and different circumstances, ranging from press statements to advertising headlines, newspaper articles about campus events, and even on one occasion an assignment that required me to identify my most important skills and attributes and how I might use these to best present myself in interviews. My classmates and I were constantly asked to think on our feet, sometimes facing what seemed to be impossible deadlines or challenges. What I never stopped to realize at the time, however, was that this was the professors' way of pushing us out of our comfort zones, and in doing so making us adapt our writing so that it was both applicable to and effective as part of a professional discourse. While I wouldn't have been able to define it this way then, looking back it seems very clear that this was indeed what these professors were doing: challenging us so that we would see our skills in writing were at least somewhat transferable to professional situations, and helping us to discover ways to make our writing even more effective as part of a professional discourse.

I credit all of these experiences with my early success in copywriting. While I had no experience writing products descriptions, I was able to approach this task as another writing assignment with a specific audience and goal in mind. I am quite uncertain I would have been able to do so if my only prior writing experience had been purely academic in nature. While I feel my experience as a communications student prepared me to write in real world settings, I'm unsure students who do not major in disciplines in which "real world" connections are emphasized enter into the workforce as prepared.

Although not all college students will become professional writers, many, if not all, will need to learn to write professionally. Being able to write well is an essential skill in any profession, and while few would dispute the importance of being able to write

well, the ways in which one's academic writing experiences inform her ability to write successfully in professional settings remain a mystery to many.

Much has been written, however, about the best ways to teach writing. From the formalists' focus on the five-paragraph essay to the social constructivists' focus on writers as part of discourse communities, academic writing theories continue to dictate the ways in which writing is taught in American colleges. While these theories may indeed prove effective strategies for writing in academia, what happens when these writers graduate? Students spend four short years within the protective walls of the university, and while it is important to succeed while inside, success outside has arguably longer-lasting effects. This is what too much of academic writing theory fails to address – its own connection with “real world” applications.

This is the connection my work will address. By looking at the differences between the qualities valued in academic writing and the attributes valued in business writing¹, I will work towards an understanding of the ways in which these values connect and fail to connect. In doing so, I, and readers of this thesis, can come to a better understanding of the ways in which these two types of writing are similar and different. While I will not be making specific pedagogical recommendations, I hope to both gain and provide insight into the ways that our experience as part of each discourse can inform our experiences with the other.

I choose to view academic and business writing as two separate discourses, each with its own set of values and principles. In order to successfully write as part of a

¹ I use the terms business writing, workplace writing, and professional writing interchangeably to refer to writing that takes place in workplace settings.

discourse community, David Bartholomae, a scholar of composition, literacy, and pedagogy, claims that students must learn to mimic its language and learn its conventions. In “Inventing the University,” he writes: “I think that all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’ – that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak” (408). Drawing on Bartholomae’s argument that writers must view themselves as fully part of the discourse community in which they are writing in order to successfully participate, I will suggest that a better understanding of the ways writing functions in the business world will help to ease students’ transitions from writing in academic contexts to writing as part of professional discourses.

My thesis begins with a brief history of the efforts made to bridge the gap between academic and business writing. I discuss the work of advocates of professional and workplace writing instruction, as well as their influence on academic writing pedagogies. I then discuss characteristics of successful academic writing and successful business writing. After defining the characteristics of successful writing in each of these discourses, I examine the ways in which they connect and fail to connect. At their core, I believe these two different types of writing have more in common than many might suspect. At the same time, transitioning from an academic setting to a business one involves learning the conventions and expectations of an entirely new workplace discourse. This transition can be simplified, however, by understanding the similarities and differences between academic and workplace writing and the ways in which writing as part of one of these discourses prepares one to write as part of the other.

2. Review of Literature

Much has already been written about the connection between academic and business writing. In this section I provide an overview of this scholarship, beginning with a look at the work of several influential theorists who argue that colleges and universities should provide writing instruction that prepares students to write in non-academic settings.

Preparing Students to Write in Business Settings

Peter Elbow, best known for his advocacy of personal and expressivist writing, is among those that recognize the need to move beyond teaching solely an academic discourse. In "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," Elbow writes, "We need nonacademic discourse even for the sake of helping students produce good academic discourse - academic language that reflects sound understanding of what they are studying in disciplinary courses" (137). While not arguing specifically for the importance of business writing instruction, Elbow supports writing instruction that prepares students to write in settings beyond the college classroom. Elbow claims that by teaching only academic discourse, instructors fail at what should be their most important goal - "helping students use writing by choice in their lives" (136). He concludes that while he cannot teach students the particular conventions they will need for all of the different disciplines and discourses they will

encounter, he can teach them the principle of discourse variation between individuals and communities (152). Thus, Elbow claims that a focus on discourse variation in the classroom prepares students to be aware of the differences between the various discourse communities they will encounter. As a result, these students are more likely to look for clues about each discourse community's conventions and thus learn to participate within them more quickly.

Donald Murray, among others, have taken this appreciation for non-academic writing a step further, recognizing not only the need to teach students to write as part of non-academic discourses, but also calling for the need for professional writing instruction. In "Why Teach Writing – And How?," Donald Murray, a proponent of process writing and advocate for writing instruction that includes non-academic discourse, claims that writing is a skill that is important both in school and after school. In 1973 he addressed doubts about the need to teach writing in a "multi-media, electronic age," claiming that cameras, radios, and computers are merely "gadgets which make it possible to communicate more efficiently or more dramatically" (1235). Murray claims that these technologies do not eliminate the need for writing, but rather increase the demand for writers (1235). Murray's work highlights the importance of writing, even in what he describes as today's multi-media, electronic age. Just as Murray claims that these technologies provide new opportunities for writing, I believe they offer new opportunities for writing instruction and further support the need for instruction that prepares students to write successfully in professional contexts.

This idea is clearly illustrated in the work of Kathryn Rentz, a professor of English who both teaches business writing and supports the inclusion of professional writing instruction in English departments. In “A Flare from the Margins: The Place of Professional Writing in English Departments,” Rentz reveals that according to a 1999 survey of University of Cincinnati graduates, over 90 percent of English majors do not go on to academic jobs in English. In response to this finding at Rentz’s university, the number of literature courses required for English majors was reduced, allowing more room for writing electives. In addition, a new course, “Discourse Communities,” was created, joining three other “toolbox courses,” one of which English students would be required to take (185). In response to its study’s finding that English majors go on to a diverse range of business careers, this university sought to better prepare its students for their future careers by making exposure to different types of professional discourse a core component of its English department’s curriculum.

Margaret A. Mansfield, a supporter of increased student opportunities for “real world” writing, discusses specific ways English students can benefit from professional writing instruction in her article, “Real World Writing and the English Curriculum.” Mansfield admits that she was once skeptical about including professional writing as part of the English curriculum, but claims that a recent experience with an MA course, “Writing for the Public,” led to her realization that “introducing professional writing assignments into a traditional writing class offers unique opportunities - at least for more experienced writers - to grapple with notions of audience, authority, and ‘real’ (i.e., serious) writing; to reflect upon their roles as writers; and to discover much about themselves, their topics, and the writing process” (69). In this class Mansfield encouraged

a “fruitful interchange between theory and practice,” (70) and provided new audiences for student writing so that students could experience writing for audiences other than the teacher (71).

Mansfield claims that her “Writing for the Public” class offered English majors three things that they probably wouldn’t have learned in the classroom if not for this exposure to professional writing. The first was the opportunity to recognize and reflect on aspects of the writing process that had long ago become habitual and intuitive. Second, students were offered increased insight into the complexity of audience and the types of collaboration that are possible in writing. Third, through reading research on both professional and other types of writing, the class created a context for reflection on their own writing, not only by comparing it with professional writing, but by questioning what constitutes real, worthwhile writing (81). Thus, Mansfield suggests that professional writing instruction provides students with unique opportunities to reflect on their own writing, as well as to consider different audiences and possibilities for collaboration. By doing so, this type of instruction also helps students to begin practicing writing as part of a professional discourse. Thus, while it is difficult to simulate a professional environment in the classroom, this opportunity to write for different audiences, even hypothetically, is critical in easing students’ transitions from academic writers to workplace writers.

Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller, professors and scholars who research rhetoric, including non-academic writing conventions, also recognize the importance of teaching “real world” writing and that most college graduates will go on to do a significant amount of writing on the job and beyond the walls of their universities. In “What We Learn from Writing on the Job,” Faigley and Miller examined the ways that

college-educated people write both on and off the job to provide insight into how they were prepared for their writing needs after college (558). Their goal was to find out how much work time college-educated people spend writing, what types of writing are required of them, and what methods of composing they use. Faigley and Miller also asked college-educated people what they thought should be taught in college writing programs (558).

Faigley and Miller visited agencies and businesses in person, interviewing over 200 people working in the metropolitan areas of Austin, Dallas, and Houston, Texas and Shreveport, Louisiana. Based on 197 responses, Faigley and Miller found that employees spent an average of 23.1% of their total work week writing. Close to 75% of the sample claimed to spend at least 10% of work time writing, while only four people responded that they never wrote on the job. Faigley and Miller make an important observation here, pointing out that these figures may actually be lower than actual time spent writing because many think of writing time as time spent producing text only and exclude planning and reviewing (560). Of the 200 people who responded to question 2, "How many letters, memos, and reports do you write in a week?" Faigley and Miller recorded a median of 2.9 letters and memos written to people inside the company and 5.2 written to people outside the company (560). Faigley and Miller also found that the median percentage of writing done collaboratively was 10% with the mean being 25%. Only 26.5% claimed to never collaborate in writing. This, Faigley and Miller claim, is one of the biggest differences between writing in the classroom and on the job – the nature of authorship (361).

Faigley and Miller also wanted to find out what college-educated people working in professional settings thought students should be learning in writing classrooms. They received 191 responses to the following question: "Based on your experiences on the job, what do you think should be taught in college writing classes?" Clarity was mentioned more than any other quality in the responses they gathered (43% of respondents mentioned clarity), followed by grammar, mechanics, and usage (42%), organization (33%), general business and technical writing (31%), brevity (26%), and specific business and technical formats (24%). Other qualities mentioned were idea development (22%), making an impact on audience (15%), vocabulary (11%), adapting to an audience or situation (10%), problem solving (7%), and college English reading (4%) (562).

From their data analysis, Faigley and Miller were able to make the following conclusions. First, many college-trained people have a sophisticated knowledge of the rhetorical demands in writing (562). Second, writing is an important and frequently used skill across all major types of occupations and employers of college-trained people (564). Third, college-trained people write diverse types of written products in a variety of media and using a variety of composing processes (556). Other valuable insights included the observation that workplace writing occurs through multiple composing processes, rather than one set composing process. Another important distinction made between academic and real-world writing was the nature of authorship. School writing is often the work of one person, while on-the-job writing tasks are frequently collaborative. Additionally, many college-educated people now involved in writing on-the-job identify poor writing as a problem within their workplaces, leading to misunderstandings and wasted time (556).

Faigley and Miller recognized the importance of preparing students to write successfully on the job. Their article ends with the question, “How will the needs of postindustrial America shape college writing courses?”(568). As information, innovation, and service industries continue to grow, on-the-job writing becomes an increasingly important skill and Faigley and Miller’s insights into how students can be best prepared to do so become increasingly valuable.

The Politics of Professional Writing Instruction

While many composition instructors and scholars agree that there is a need to prepare students to write in business settings, there is much debate over where and how this should be done. Even among those that agree that preparation for writing in business settings should be among the goals of colleges and universities, views vary significantly about whether this type of learning should be the responsibility of English departments. Further, those who believe that the English department should address this need to prepare students to write in business settings still struggle with the best way to incorporate this type of instruction into their courses.

Chris M. Anson, a leading advocate for writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, addresses the complexities of teaching professional writing in the English department in his article “The Classroom and the ‘Real World’ as Contexts: Re-examining the Goals of Writing Instruction.” Anson addresses the dilemma that English departments face, questioning whether the purpose of writing instruction should be humanizing and promote self-discovery or pragmatic and prepare students for the “real world.” Anson begins by stating that continued research into composition has widened the gap between

those who think writing instruction needs reform and those holding steadfastly to tradition (1). Anson describes these two competing views as one seeing writing as an academic endeavor designed to provide a liberal and humanistic education, and the other as advocating for teaching writing as a skill that can be used in future classrooms and beyond (2). Throughout this piece, Anson seems to be calling for a compromise, warning that educators are falling prey to this “attitude of extremes” (5).

Anson argues that educators must encourage a respect for all contexts in which writing is done (6). He writes, “Students learn to ‘survive’ not only in the ‘real world’ beyond academia, but in other academic contexts whose ties with that world are more apparent than those of the literature department” (4). Anson advocates for acknowledging the role of discourse communities and understanding that each has its own rules for what constitutes successful writing (8). He cites writing across the curriculum initiatives as a way to teach students to adapt to the language of different discourse communities (10). Learning to write as part of different academic discourses provides a fruitful starting point for students to learn to adapt their writing in order to be successful in different situations and contexts. It also promotes the focus on discourse variations that Elbow supports², and perhaps begins to prepare students to write within the conventions of different discourses, something that they will need to learn to do in order to successfully transition from academic writers to workplace writers.

The politics of teaching professional writing in the English department are undoubtedly complex and many challenges arise from introducing this type of instruction into what is often a department most focused on literature. Kathryn Rentz claims that

² See Elbow “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues.”

even after the statistics were released that found that 90% of her university's English majors do not go on to academic careers in English, writing faculty still faced plenty of resistance from others in the English department in wanting to introduce their class on discourse communities. Rentz claims that in order for her "Discourse Communities" class to be approved, writing faculty in favor of it had to remind resisting faculty that it was not a course in producing professional discourse, but instead one taking an analytic and critical approach. Rentz claims that a class described as the former would not have been approved (185).

This resistance indicates just how complicated the politics in academia and English departments are. Rentz suggests that there is still plenty of resistance against professional writing instruction from English faculty, even at a time in which she claims professional writing is the largest area of growth in English departments. Despite the number of professional writing courses growing exponentially, Rentz claims that books depicting English studies during this time practically ignore the presence of professional writing in English courses, indicating that there is still plenty of resistance to their inclusion in the English department's curriculum (186). Rentz asks:

Does this neglect imply that professional writing can simply be folded into composition studies--that the two areas of writing instruction are largely interchangeable, and thus that what we say about the relation of composition to literary studies holds true for professional writing as well? Or is professional writing a nasty little secret of English departments, one representing an embarrassing compromise with capitalism and the technostate about which we'd rather not speak? (186)

Kate Ronald also addresses this dilemma in “The Politics of Teaching Professional Writing,” an article in which she questions whether her goal as a professional writing instructor is to help students get jobs and promotions or to help them become critical thinkers who can change and improve those professions. Ronald, an English professor and the Director of Miami University's Howe Writing Initiative, a collaborative project between the English and business departments designed to enhance the quality of writing in the school of business, suggests that these two goals don't have to be conflicting ones. Instead, she suggests that she can best educate her students by achieving a synthesis that satisfies both (23). Ronald also discusses the politics of teaching professional writing, suggesting that some English teachers “don't want to dirty their hands by exploring writing outside the academy.” Those that do want to explore writing that takes place in non-academic settings face the challenge of deciding whether they should look at what composition research indicates are the best approaches for teaching writing that occurs outside of the classroom or study what companies and executives consider good writing to be (24). This is indeed a complicated issue, one that Ronald's work succeeds in bringing attention to.

Bridging the Gap between Academia and the Workplace

The transition from writing in academic settings to writing in the workplace is a complicated one. Several theorists' research has led to pedagogical recommendations designed to address this gap. Their suggestions seek to provide ways to incorporate writing instruction that will prepare students to write in business settings, while balancing this new type of instruction with more traditional composition classroom goals.

In “From Workplace to Classroom: Teaching Professional Writing,” Mark Marbrito, a professor and researcher of professional writing, claims that classroom models for teaching professional writing often do not accurately reflect the ways in which writing is done in the workplace. He explains that this is the result of too many instructors ignoring the context in which actual workplace writing occurs. Marbrito warns that many professionals feel that their college degrees did not adequately prepare them to write professionally. What is needed is the addition of a dimension of workplace reality to the classroom. Marbrito claims that this is best accomplished through a focus on audience analysis, collaborative writing, and effective models of a variety of workplace documents (101-04). Through an increased focus on audience and collaboration, instructors can begin to prepare students to write successfully in non-academic contexts without taking attention away from other important goals of the composition classroom.

Kate Ronald suggests that it is the nature of the writing itself that differs between academic and workplace settings. In “The Politics of Teaching Professional Writing,” Ronald argues that composition theorists want writing to be a way in which students discover things about themselves, but the business world wants writers to obtain predetermined results. Ronald claims, “Those who employ our students are less interested in their personal growth than in their ability to fit in and obtain predetermined results,” and that as a result high schools and colleges are expected to “turn out ‘skilled’ writers who understand the conventions and constraints of writing outside the academy” (23). Ronald claims that in order to bridge the gap between these varying views of writing’s purpose, instructors should help students analyze their potential professions by focusing on the way writing invents those professions and by having students write about

professional texts and examine discipline-specific rules (28). Indeed many employers value product and outcome over process and growth. Ronald's recommendation that instructors have students examine the way writing invents the professions that they are interested in pursuing provides these students with opportunities for inquiry and critical thinking and offers a compromise between the personal growth students should experience in the college composition classroom and the types of writing their future careers will likely demand.

Kathleen Kelly, a professor of English at Babson College, claims that through carefully thought out assignments and pedagogies, the English department can have the best of both worlds. It can embrace the humanities, while still offering career-focused applications. In "Professional Writing in the Humanities Course," Kelly suggests that professional writing is best taught in an advanced expository writing class. Using her recommendations, Kelly claims a professional writing course can be fit into the undergraduate curriculum without sacrificing what she describes as "often meager" humanities requirements. Kelly writes, "Doing professional writing in humanities courses will not give students all the practice in professional writing they can use. But it does give them practice in what the English teacher is best qualified to teach: writing for decision-makers" (236). Kelly's suggestion that professional writing instruction take place in an advanced expository writing class is a practical way to incorporate it into the English curriculum, as interested students could elect to take this type of course. This would also limit the number of students who are exposed to professional writing, however, much more so than including an introduction to this type of instruction in a required or more widely taken class.

LynnDiane Beene, a professor at the University of New Mexico and a professional writer herself, suggests a different way to bridge this gap, calling for what she considers a common sense approach, one centered on grammar instruction. Beene argues that grammar is a valuable skill writers of all types must learn to master. As both a professional writer and an academic writing instructor, Beene is keenly aware that these types of writing come with very different sets of rules and purposes. Beene claims that one side forgets practicality, while the other loses sight of the bigger picture (2).

Beene's common sense approach is guided by her belief that good writing is simply good writing (4), seeming to suggest that one's skill as a writer is transferable from the classroom to the workplace. She also claims that professional writing serves as proof of the importance of grammar instruction, suggesting that one must learn how to use the rules to be effective before one can break them for the same reason (5). Beene writes, "It's time to realize that if an individual can write a good sentence than that individual is going to be, at the very least, a better writer" (7) and that "as academics we need to take what professionals know and use it" (7). While Beene offers a useful perspective as both an instructor and a professional writer, her focus on grammar as a transferable skill from academic writing contexts to business settings ignores the complexities of both of these discourse communities and oversimplifies what is often a very difficult transition from composing in academic settings to writing in the workplace.

3. Theories of Teaching Writing

Reviewing the history of efforts made to incorporate professional writing instruction into academic settings in order to bridge the gap between academic and

business writing provides a solid foundation on which to situate further study. My own works seeks to build on this growing field of scholarship, and will begin with an examination of the ways in which good writing is defined by different groups of composition specialists. By looking at all of these values together, I can begin to determine what the most valued attributes of academic writing are and use them as points of comparison for the most valued qualities of business writing in order to see the values that successful writing in these two different discourse share.

What is good writing? While it would likely be impossible to get any group of people to agree to a single, shared answer, what most can agree on is that “good” writing varies based on the purpose it needs to serve, or what rhetoricians call the rhetorical situation. The writing that earns a student an “A” on an academic paper and the writing that convinces a consumer to purchase one brand of a product instead of another competing brand are certainly both “good” in their own ways. While both have merit and may be successful in achieving their respective purposes, they are also inherently very different.

Identifying what makes academic writing successful is no simple task. There is no single standard by which writing is judged and no single definition of what constitutes good academic writing. A look at the major composition theories provides a good starting point by offering some perspective on what different groups of composition specialists consider successful academic writing to be. By focusing on specific factors that influence how successful students write, each group of theorists comes to value specific characteristics in those writers’ work.

The major composition theories I will examine are formalism, cognitivism, expressivism, and social constructivism. Formalists value correctness in writing, believing that surface-level errors and disorganization cause truth to get lost, while cognitivists value the composing process involved in producing texts. Expressivists are primarily concerned with personal growth and value authority and authenticity in writing. Finally, social constructivists view the writer as part of a larger social context and focus on the ways in which successful writers adapt to different discourse communities. A closer look at each of these schools of thought reveals the ways in which each group's focus and beliefs lead them to value certain characteristics of student writing.

Formalism

Formalists, also called current-traditionalists or traditionalists, study texts as they are, without taking into account any outside influences. They assume an objectivity of text elements, and believe all important issues about a text and its meaning can be addressed through an analysis of these text elements (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 277)³. Texts can be examined in this way because of the formalists' presumed objectivity of texts. The formalists believe that certain objective properties are invariant across the intentions of the writer and the interpretation of the reader (Olson 119). Thus, the formalists believe that examining text elements allows for an objective evaluation.

This focus on objectivity leads formalists to approach writing in much the same way as one would tackle a math problem. Like math problems have one correct answer,

³ Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt are in fact critics of formalism, yet their work provides a useful summary of the key characteristics of this movement among others. See "Where Did Composition Studies Come From?: An Intellectual History."

formalist composition theorists believe that there is one “correct” way to write. According to Martin Nystrand and colleagues, whose work provides a historical overview of the emergence of writing research as a field of empirical research, writing to the formalists means learning to avoid text errors (77). Similarly, formalist writing instruction is also dominated by a focus on correctness. In *High School English Instruction Today*, James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee list prescriptive grammar, usage, and rhetorical principles as the main topics addressed by formalist writing instructors. They also claim that formalists often use model texts as examples of “good writing,” and that lessons often center on how to avoid common errors (253-55). This idea is confirmed by James Lynch and Bertrand Evan’s 1963 study of textbooks, which showed that over twice as many textbook pages addressed grammar usage and mechanics than showed any emphasis on units larger than the sentence (Lynch and Evans qtd. in Squire and Applebee 128).

This focus on surface-level features is likely the result of the formalist idea that writing conveys a truth and that successful writers are able to convey this truth to their readers. Thus, if the reader is able to uncover that truth the writer can be considered successful. Surface-level errors and disorganization cause this truth to get lost. Thus, according to Nystrand and colleagues, formalist writing instruction also teaches students to read and analyze texts in order to uncover a core meaning. This truth can be discovered through an analysis of formal text features like speech and rhythm (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 275). Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt write, “Student writers were taught to create unambiguous, explicit texts by manipulating text elements, including topic and clincher sentences, usage and syntax. The purpose of the text was to fix the meaning in a

stable, objective representation” (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 276). Thus, the correct representation means that the meaning will be able to be uncovered by readers.

This focus on representation and a single correct way to write can also be seen in formalism’s legacy – the five-paragraph essay. Perhaps more important than the popularity of the five-paragraph essay is the formalist belief that this structure proves effective, regardless of context. Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt claim that the five-paragraph theme, consisting of an introductory paragraph, three points developed in three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph, was seen by the formalists as the correct structure regardless of assignment, argument, or audience (275). This aligns with the formalist viewpoint that there is a single, correct way to write, and that, further, there is a single, correct form for nearly every writing situation.

The result of this focus on correctness, according to Robert J. Connors, a scholar of composition and rhetoric, is that composition began to be viewed as an enforcement of standards of mechanical correctness. Connors writes, “Throughout most of its history as a college subject, English composition has meant one thing to most people: the single-minded enforcement of standards of mechanical and grammatical correctness in writing” (65). While this focus on correctness is certainly no longer representative of composition instruction as a whole, Connors’ argument points to what are two of the formalists’ most valued writing attributes – mechanical and grammatical correctness. To this, we can add organization and form, derived from the prevalence of the five-paragraph essay and the belief that it can be applied to any situation, to complete the picture of “good” writing from the formalist perspective.

Cognitivism

Writing research and values shifted with the movement toward cognitivism in the 1970s and early 1980s. Concerned with cognitive conceptions of the writing process, this movement put emphasis on understanding the individual. Cognitivist composition theory is highly influenced by the work of Janet Emig, Linda Flower, John R. Hayes and Andrea Lunsford, among others.

Cognitivists define the writing process as a set of distinctive thinking processes that writers draw upon during the act of composing (Flower and Hayes 366). Further, cognitivists believe the act of composing is guided by the writer's own growing network of goals (Flower and Hayes 366). Additionally, because thought processes are behaviorally influenced, cognitivist researchers must figure out how people write by observing them while they do so. This observation thus emphasizes the writing process, and as Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt suggest, leads to the reconceptualization of writing as a dynamic process of constructing meaning (285).

Janet Emig, best known for her influential contributions to studies of the composing process, was among the first to examine the cognitive processes of writers, describing the composing process as recursive rather than linear (Faigley 532). Emig studied six twelfth grade students, focusing on the way in which they approached certain composition tasks. She observed that these students, contrary to textbook advice at the time, did not compose "as a left-to-right, solid, uninterrupted activity with an even pace" (Emig 84). Instead, her work suggests that writing is a recursive process rather than a

linear one. The result was a new focus on the process itself, something that would come to be viewed as an essential part of good writing.

Like Emig, Flower and Hayes, best known for their study of the cognitive process theory of writing, claim that the writer's discovery and its products are only the end of a complicated, intellectual process. Readers don't find meaning, as the formalists' "metaphor of discovery" suggests, rather they construct it themselves. The intellectual process Flower and Hayes identified begins with defining the rhetorical problem. By collecting think aloud protocols from both novice and expert writers, Flower and Hayes determined that good writers respond to all aspects of the rhetorical problem by building a unique representation of their audience and assignment, as well as their goals involving the audience, their own persona and the text. Poor writers, however, are primarily concerned with the written text and more surface-level features like format and page count (474-5).

In building their problem representations, good writers create a rich network of goals for affecting their readers, and in the process generate new ideas. In this study, 60% of good writers' new ideas were in response to the larger rhetorical problem, including the assignment, audience, and their own new goals. The poor writers' new ideas, however, were simply new statements about the topic and did not show much concern for the larger rhetorical problem (Flower and Hayes 475). Thus, Flower and Hayes conclude that good writers represent rhetorical problems not only in more breadth, but also in more depth than less successful writers. Good writers continue to develop an image of the reader, the situation, and their goals with increasing detail, while poor writers continue writing with the underdeveloped representation of the problem they

started with (476). By extension, then, good writing is writing that responds to all of the rhetorical problems at hand, and it comes as the result of a recursive process through which successful writers continually redefine the problem their writing is attempting to solve. Good writing addresses the intent of the assignment and also affects its audience.

Although ultimately not best known for her work in the cognitivist domain, Andrea Lunsford's early research also points to the importance of intent and audience, further supporting their inclusion in the cognitivist definition of good writing. Lunsford's analysis of essays written in response to topics on the British Columbia English Placement Test led to her conclusion that basic writers have difficulty distancing themselves from the topics on which they write. As a result, they do not often achieve what developmental psychologist Jean Piaget refers to as a "non-egocentric rhetorical stance," and cannot look at multiple perspectives on the topic (281). Lunsford ties this difficulty to the inability to conceptualize and generalize a problem with confidence (284). She urges instructors to help students become more apt at conceptualizing and producing academic discourse, while at the same time cautioning them about letting students lose their directness, which she claims is a strength of basic writers (287). Lunsford claims that instructors must engage basic writers in a full rhetorical context in which they can work to solve problems; otherwise they will continue to be limited by their language (288).

What Lunsford's work contributes to the cognitivist definition of good writing is an increased focus on the writer's ability to consider viewpoints other than her own and to define the rhetorical problem in a way that considers and meets the needs of her audience. Like the cognitivist viewpoint as a whole, this value is derived from a focus on

thought and composing processes. It is from these processes that the movement's other values, the ability to successfully define and respond to all aspects of a rhetorical problem, can also be derived.

Expressivism

Expressivists, like cognitivists, focus on the individual, but they do so with a more "romantic" viewpoint, one that centers on personal growth. The expressivists believe that the best writing comes from individuals working on projects that they are passionate about, and that personal development is the key to better writing. This view of composition is highly influenced by the work of Gordon Rohman, Albert Wlecke, Donald Stewart, Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Lil Brannon, and James Moffet.

Lester Faigley credits Rohman and Wlecke with the beginning of what he calls the "neo-Romantic" view of process (529). Rohman and Wlecke's 1964 study of the effects of pre-writing suggested that thinking and writing were separate and that thinking preceded writing. As a result, they urged teachers to stimulate their students' thinking with pre-writing activities like journal writing (Faigley 529). Rohman and Wlecke claim that "'good writing' must be the discovery by a responsible person of his uniqueness within his subject" (107-8). It is the discovery of a combination of words that allows one to dominate her subject in this original way, while "bad writing" is an echo of someone else's combination of words taken over for a time for the occasion of one's own writing (Rohman and Wlecke 107-8).

This element of integrity is an important one to expressivist writing theorists, and one that is echoed in the work of expressivist theorist Donald Stewart. Stewart claims

that the most important attribute of student writing is integrity. He writes, "The user of words must believe that they are true, that they describe things as they are, within the limits of his capability to perceive them" (224). Stewart suggests that he respects the use of language, even by those with different views than him, if the language is honest (224). He concludes that a primary objective in any composition course should be to teach students the integrity of the written word and to make integrity an expectation in their work (225).

Authority and authenticity are also stressed in the work of Donald Murray, a proponent of writing as a three-stage process of prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Murray names authority and voice as two of the qualities of good writing. He defines authority as writing that is specific, accurate, and honest. Murray claims that the reader is persuaded through authoritative information and the belief that the writer is knowledgeable about the subject he is writing about. Murray also suggests that good writing is marked by individual voice, and that this may be the most significant element in distinguishing memorable writing from good writing ("The Handout Page," 79).

In addition to authority and authenticity, expressivists also value spontaneity. Elbow's point of view, that good writing does not follow rules but rather reflects processes of the creative imagination, is another standard of the expressivist viewpoint (Faigley 530). Elbow advocates for a balance between creativity and critical thinking. He claims that both are important, but that a writer can't let the importance of one hinder the other. Elbow also cautions the writer against planning too much, claiming that in the early stages of writing it is often better to plan less and write more, perhaps even going so far as to put the reader out of mind for the time being (*Writing With Power* xiii). Elbow

believes that writing should unfold spontaneously, and as such it should expose false starts and confused preliminary exploration of the topic (Faigley 530). Elbow suggests that this unformed material can later be shaped during revision (Faigley 531).

The work of Lil Brannon and colleagues also values the expressive quality of student writing. Brannon et al. urge educators to give writers plenty of opportunities to express their ideas, claiming that students learn through the act of writing itself. Brannon and colleagues strongly urge instructors to resist teaching the five-paragraph essay, which they claim assumes writing is done by a formula and in a social vacuum and forces a focus on academic exercises rather than meaningful acts of communication (16). Because students learn by writing, the five-paragraph format prohibits learning through its presence as a constraining, mythic form. The authors argue that what writers need are opportunities to write and to participate within multiple genres, because it is through the writing itself that writers make affiliations, which she claims are the relationships that mark them as participants within the discourse (Brannon et al. 17). Brannon and colleagues suggest that writing should not be another way to train students to be obedient citizens, but rather provide them with opportunities to improve their individual thinking and make meaning through their composing (17).

Like Brannon and colleagues, James Moffet also stresses the importance of self-actualization and self-expression. Moffet, perhaps best known for his work *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, claims that writing and meditation are naturally allied activities and that through practicing one, one can practice the other. Moffet suggests that one can create a three-way relationship between writing, meditation, and inner speech, but that to do so writing must be considered in its “high sense – beyond copying and transcribing,

paraphrasing and plagiarizing - as authentic authoring” (231). Further, Moffet argues that writing that functions as real authoring discovers as much as it communicates (235). Thus, he suggests that like good therapy, good writing aims at clear thinking, effective relating, and satisfying self-expression (Moffet 235).

In summary, expressivists value integrity and authenticity, largely due to their belief that good writing coincides with personal growth and that one must both believe her own words and seek to make unique discoveries in her work. Like discovery, spontaneity and expression are also valued, qualities that are perhaps best illustrated in Elbow’s work and his claim that even false starts should be exposed in one’s writing and valued as part of the writing process.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivists focus on the role that community plays. These theorists recognize that the writer does not compose as an individual, but rather as part of a community. What writers learn depends largely on the environment in which they are writing. As a result, there is a focus on collaboration among writers as well as between writer and reader. Social constructivism is significantly influenced by the work of Mina Shaughnessy, Lev Vygotsky, Patricia Bizzell, and David Bartholomae.

Social theories of writing instruction emphasize social participation. Social writing theorists see writing as “chains of short- and long-term production, representation, reception, and distribution” (Prior 57). Writing involves a dialogic process of invention in which even the lone writer is using an array of social, historically provided resources (Prior 58). Lev Vygotsky’s work on language development and

acquisition significantly influenced social theories of writing. Vygotsky, founder of cultural-historical psychology, studies language development as a historical and cultural process in which a child acquires not only words, but the intentions carried by those words and the situations implied by them (qtd. in Bizzell 85-86).

Vygotsky focuses on the ways in which people encounter, appropriate, use, and re-fashion historically developed material and semiotic resources through their day to day engagements in cultural practices (Prior 57). He studied mental growth in relation to language learning and participation, and claims that written language is a tool through which writers can enter into more extensive interactions. Vygotsky claims that texts serve as resources through which the zone of proximal development, the difference between what a learner can do with and without help, can be extended (Kennedy 336).

Also essential to the social constructivist viewpoint is the idea that individual writers compose not in isolation but as members of communities “whose discursive practices constrain the ways they structure meaning” (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 289). Thus, the problems student writers face can be explained by their lack of familiarity with the conventions of academic discourse (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 289). Further, Mina Shaughnessy, best known for her scholarship on basic writing, suggests that writing itself is a social act and that learning to write is a process of socialization into the academic community. Effective basic writing instruction requires understanding the logic and history of errors and tracing the line of reasoning that leads to them (Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* 105). Thus, the writing process cannot be explained completely in cognitive terms because errors have much to do with a lack of

practice and familiarity with conventions of academic discourse (Shaughnessy, "Diving In" 236).

Similarly, Bizzell argues that literacy problems should be understood as ongoing difficulties in unfamiliar discourse communities, rather than simply difficulties in thinking (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 289). Bizzell claims that separation of words from ideas distorts the composing process. Thus, when students write as part of an academic discourse, they are doing so in reference to texts that define scholarly activities of interpreting and reporting in that discipline (Faigley 535). Thus, there is a need to recognize the different linguistic worlds students come from.

According to Bizzell, a professor and scholar whose work addresses the diversification of academic discourse and its effect on writing pedagogies, basic writers are best understood in terms of unfamiliarity with academic discourse. She suggests that with limited experiences outside of their native discourses, these writers may be unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered. What is underdeveloped, then, is knowledge of the ways in which experience is constituted and interpreted in the academic discourse community, and an understanding that all discourse communities constitute and interpret experience (Bizzell 230). Thus, what the writer needs to be successful is increased knowledge about the community in which she is writing and familiarity with the conventions that are part of her new discourse community.

Similarly, Bartholomae claims that writing in college is difficult for inexperienced writers because students lack the privileged language of the academic community. Every

time a student writes she has to learn to invent the university, to speak the language of the discourse. Inventing the university involves assembling and mimicking its language and finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy and personal history and the requirements of convention and history of the discipline (Bartholomae 1). Students have to appropriate a specialized discourse and do it as though they are comfortably one with their audience, further complicating the problem of audience awareness (Bartholomae 3-4). This experience is not unique to the academic writer, but describes that of all writers entering a new discourse community for the first time. Writers entering the world of business must also learn to mimic the language of this new discourse in order to be successful participants.

Bartholomae suggests that writers who can successfully manipulate or accommodate their motives to their readers' expectations are writers who can imagine and write from a position of privilege (4). Thus, they must see themselves within the privileged discourse in order to successfully write as part of it. Like Bizzell and Shaughnessy, Bartholomae also suggests that errors are the result of unfamiliarity with the discourse. He claims that sentences fall apart not because the basic writer lacks the necessary syntax to glue the pieces together, but because she lacks the full statement within which these words are operating - complete knowledge of the discourse (7).

Thus, social constructivist theory supports viewing writing as a mode of social action, not simply as a means of communication. The writer is influenced by a multitude of societal factors, and writing takes place in an array of settings. Good writing, then, does not have to be limited to writing that takes place in academic settings or writing that is done to serve an academic purpose. This is quite a departure from the five-paragraph

form and strict adherence to format supported by the formalists. It opens the door to many more definitions of what can constitute good writing, and consequently a much wider range of assessment possibilities. Additionally, it supports the study of writing that takes place in non-academic settings, including what constitutes successful workplace writing.

Good writing, from the social constructivist viewpoint, is also discourse-specific. It involves familiarizing oneself with the discourse in which she is writing. Successfully entering a new discourse involves the ability to imagine oneself as already a privileged member of that discourse. Thus, good writing is writing that conforms to the conventions of the particular discourse in which it is written, is composed with an understanding of the rules and conventions of that discourse, and satisfies the needs of a discourse-specific audience.

While an examination of the dominant composition theories does not make possible a single definition of what good writing is or how it should be taught, it does make it possible to infer what each group values most in student writing. While we can't achieve a perfect synthesis of these values to paint one overall picture of what good academic writing is, extracting the most prominent values from each of these theories does offer some perspective. Good writing serves a purpose, achieving its goal by first defining the rhetorical problem it needs to solve. It is aware of its purpose and of its intended audience. Good writing follows a format, perhaps not one as rigid as the five-paragraph essay, but it is organized and presented in a way that makes sense for the specific assignment or task at hand. Additionally, good writing is created through a recursive process. It involves discovery, whether it's the reader uncovering the truth the

author is representing, or a process through which the writer makes his own meaning. Either way, it is a learning process that improves the writer's thinking and one through which he or she furthers his or her own intellectual growth.

4. Teaching Writing in Practice: An Examination of Representative Textbooks

Now that I've examined four of the major schools of composition theory, I will look at the ways in which these theories manifest themselves in practice. To do so, I will analyze three popular first-year composition texts and rhetorics. Much in the same way each of the major composition movements values certain characteristics of student writing, these textbooks also emphasize, both explicitly and implicitly, certain features of student writing. While each values specific attributes of student writing, all three texts value strong, supported arguments and emphasize the need to acknowledge one's purpose and audience to make these arguments effectively.

The three texts I have chosen to study are *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing, Fourth Edition* by Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper; *They Say/ I Say* by Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst; and *Everything's an Argument* by Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruskiewicz. While these three books may not be the definitive three best-selling composition texts, I choose them on the basis that they are among the best-selling, are widely used, and are the work of major players in the field of composition. Together, I believe they are representative of much of what is being taught in first-year composition classrooms that strive to keep up-to-date with current theories and best practices.

The St. Martin's Guide to Writing

Axelrod and Cooper's *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* consists of six sections: writing activities, critical thinking strategies, writing strategies, research strategies, writing for assessment, and a handbook. Its focus on strategies seems initially to embody a formalist viewpoint, however its focus on scenarios proves less rigid than it initially appears and is in fact quite practical. Axelrod and Cooper's strong emphasis on the rhetorical situation implies a social constructivist view of composition, one that looks at writers as part of discourse communities. By focusing on the ways in which different scenarios call for different approaches to one's writing, Axelrod and Cooper are promoting a social view of writing, as well as seeking to prepare students to successfully write as part of multiple discourse communities.

This emphasis on rhetorical situation is best seen in the "Writing Activities" section of *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, which consists of nine different essay assignments that reflect actual writing situations students may encounter. Each of these sections addresses a different type of writing, which is first discussed in the context of occasions in which it might be used. This is followed by a set of readings, which is accompanied by discussion questions and questions that ask students to analyze the readings. Next is a summary of the purpose and features of the specific type of writing, as well as a discussion of its typical audience. Proofreading and editing guidelines help students check for several sentence-level problems likely to occur in each type of writing,

and are followed by a look at a sample writer's work, which begins to put the chapter's key concepts together.

Axelrod and Cooper's focus on each type of writing's unique features and intended audience seems to implicitly support David Bartholomae's idea that in order to successfully write as part of a discourse community, one must learn its conventions and mimic its language⁴. Axelrod and Cooper's focus on different strategies for different types of writing assignments also brings to mind the work of Richard Haswell. Haswell suggests that even within school settings, writing rules vary by discipline. Even within the walls of academia, different subjects have their own styles and rules that writers must learn to abide by⁵. It is this idea, that different writing tasks call for different approaches and rules, that Axelrod and Cooper's text seeks to impart on its readers. Through its use of scenarios and strategies, *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* offers a practical tool for helping students to accomplish this.

Indeed, Axelrod and Cooper claim that their principal goal in writing this guide is to demystify writing and authorize students as writers (iii). Their objective is to continue the classical tradition of teaching writing not only as a method of composing rhetorically effective prose, but also as a powerful heuristic for thinking creatively and critically (Axelrod and Copper iii). Further, they claim that writing is both a social act and a way of knowing, and that their primary goal is to "teach students how to use the composing process as a means of seeing what they know as well as how they know it" (iii). Axelrod and Cooper seem to be influenced by many of the dominant composition theories, and

⁴ See Bartholomae "Inventing the University."

⁵ See Haswell "The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing: Or, Looking for Shortcuts via the Road of Excess."

overall provide a well-rounded approach to writing instruction. While the authors never explicitly define what they think good writing is, they do go as far as to claim that students whose writing is logically organized, well supported, and inventive usually do well in academic settings (3). They support the idea that writing is highly teachable, arguing that virtually anyone can learn to write confidently enough to handle college and job writing (4).

Axelrod and Cooper also claim that form emerges from context and content. From different kinds of writing, writers learn different ways of developing their thoughts. Additionally, they suggest that learning to analyze and evaluate ideas fosters habits of critical inquiry (2). They claim that writing influences the way we think and take part in conversations around us (4). Here, Axelrod and Cooper seem to be suggesting that writing teaches the writer, an idea that supports the expressivist viewpoint that personal development is the key to better writing.

Axelrod and Cooper also explicitly support a social approach to writing, claiming that writing comes not from studying static forms alone, but also from participating in a community of writers and readers (iii). They claim that their guide provides scaffolding as students learn the features and strategies of each genre (9), an approach that seems practical and suggests that different considerations are needed for each writing situation. To learn the conventions of a genre, Axelrod and Cooper claim that writers need to read examples of and practice writing in that genre (6). They also suggest that writing and reading different kinds of discourse prepares students to write effectively and read critically, as well as to know what counts and how to join disciplinary conversation (iii),

an idea that further echoes those of David Bartholomae, Richard Haswell, and Patricia Bizzell⁶.

Axelrod and Cooper also support a process approach to writing, claiming that writing from start to finish is “dangerous.” They claim that all writers need to develop a process that will help them think critically and master a genre. Continuing to embrace both the cognitivist and expressivist viewpoints, Axelrod and Cooper claim that writing is both a recursive process and a process of discovery (8). Their text seeks to push students beyond learning to write, encouraging them to examine the factors that influence how they do so. Like their focus on rhetorical situation, this also promotes a social view of writing, encouraging students to see themselves as part of a community of writers. Their text is also influenced by cognitivist and expressivist views of composition, promoting an awareness of the writing process and focusing on the importance of the writer’s personal growth. As a result, *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* promotes the following values: writing is a recursive process, discovery is an important part of what makes writing good, and what defines good writing is specific to the discourse community in which it takes place.

They Say / I Say

Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst claim that their goal in writing *They Say/ I Say* is to demystify academic writing by isolating its basic moves and explaining and representing them in the form of templates (xi). To write well, they claim, means to enter into conversation with others. To write well in academic settings, Graff, Birkenstein, and

⁶ See Bartholomae “Inventing the University,” Haswell “The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing: Or, Looking for Shortcuts via the Road of Excess,” and Bizzell “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing.”

Durst suggest that students must master several rhetorical moves, the most important of which is summarizing what others have said “they say” and responding with one’s own argument “I say” (xi). Each student’s goal, then, should be to enter into a “conversation of ideas,” in which the writer engages the voices of others and allows those voices to engage her in return (xi).

In addition to explaining the key rhetorical moves that students must master to write well academically, *They Say/I Say* also provides writing templates that offer explicit instruction on how to accomplish these rhetorical moves. Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst claim that all writers can rely on certain stock formulas that they themselves didn’t invent (xiii). Their text shows students these key rhetorical moves in an approachable language and with user-friendly templates they can readily apply to help them make these moves in their own writing. Teaching through templates certainly sounds formalist in nature, but taking a page out of their own section on anticipating the needs of your audience, Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst almost immediately seek to assuage this fear by claiming that templates don’t dictate the content of what students’ say, only the format in which they say it (11). Additionally, they claim that templates provide the explicit representation of rhetorical moves that many students need (xvii). Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst suggest that these templates help students to present beliefs that they find so self-evident they don’t believe they need to argue (xvi).

Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst claim that they say/I say is the underlying structure of academic writing and that this model can improve both writing and reading comprehension (xiv). They also suggest that academic writing is inherently argumentative writing, and that the best academic writing is deeply engaged in others’

views (3). Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst also stress the importance of effective summarizing, arguing that writers who make strong claims need to be able to map them as relative to other people (28). This is what their templates seek to help students accomplish. Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst claim that writers need to explain what they are responding to early in the discussion and present their claims as part of larger conversations (18). They also caution students about using others' ideas, suggesting that while good writing is putting oneself in dialogue with other views, it must always be clear to the reader whose ideas belong to the writer and whose come from other sources (64).

While argument is what gets most of Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst's attention, they do spend a short time discussing audience later in their work. They address the "Who cares?" question, reminding students that it is important that their writing converse with others and not only with themselves (88). In fact, Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst claim that part of the writer's objective should be telling her audience how it should interpret her argument (123). The authors even discuss addressing one's critics, claiming that quoting someone else gives credibility to a summary (39). In fact, they suggest that giving possible objections explicit hearing in one's writing can actually strengthen her argument. Thus, making the best case for one's critics can bolster her credibility, rather than undermining it (75).

Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst's belief that templates can be applied to any situation is reminiscent of the formalist viewpoint that the five-paragraph essay is an effective format regardless of context. This is balanced, however, by their focus on writing as a recursive process, as well as their belief that students can expand their

thinking and discover something in the process, a belief that is expressivist in nature. Indeed, Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst seem to support a process writing pedagogy throughout. Using their templates might be the best starting point, but they also seem to support the idea that writing can be continually improved. They write, "After all the goal of writing is not to keep proving that whatever you initially said is right, but to stretch the limits of your thinking" (85-86). This statement implies both that the authors see writing as a recursive process, as well as that they approach writing from a somewhat expressivist viewpoint, one through which students can expand their thinking and discover something in the process.

Overall, their text promotes summarizing the ideas of others and effectively responding to those ideas as the markers of good academic writing. At its core, then, this text indicates that successfully defining and responding to the rhetorical problem is what makes academic writing successful. The they say/ I say paradigm functions as an explicit representation of this often internalized process, acting as a helpful tool for students learning to write as part of an academic discourse. Thus, for Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst, good writing, as aligned with the cognitive view of composition, successfully defines and responds to the rhetorical problem at hand.

Everything's an Argument

The title of *Everything's an Argument* says it all, and Lunsford and Ruskiewicz begin by stating that their title does indeed sum up two key assumptions. The first is that language provides the most powerful means of understanding the world. Second, using

that understanding to help shape lives and language is persuasive, pointing in a direction and asking for a response (v). Thus, everything is a potential argument.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz claim that in some ways all language has an argumentative edge that aims to make a point, but that not all language aims to win out over others (7). Further, they suggest that an argument can be any text that expresses a point of view. It can be what most readers traditionally think of as an argument – a sometimes aggressive text composed to deliberately change what readers believe, think, or do. By their definition, however, an argument can also be a text that's more subtly designed to convince others or oneself that specific facts are reliable or that other views should be considered or at least tolerated (4). While both definitions are important, I especially value their second definition of argument, as I believe this definition of argument can be extended to many different writing situations. While not all writing aggressively seeks to change others' minds, nearly all writing seeks to convince its writers of something and perhaps even all writing advocates that its own sources are reliable and that it is worth reading.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz discuss six key issues that need to be addressed for students to master the art of argument and thus become successful academic writers. These issues are: connecting as a reader or writer, understanding lines of argument, making a claim, giving an argument shape, giving an argument style, and managing the conventions of argument (29). When it comes to actually writing the argument, Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz urge their readers to remember that not every argument is packaged in a neat sentence or thesis. First, writers should find a strategy to build a case. Their arguments should be based on one of the following four strategies: arguments of the

heart, arguments based on values, arguments based on character, and arguments based on facts and reason (32). Writers should then work towards establishing credibility by listening closely to those they want to reach, demonstrating knowledge, highlighting shared values, referring to common experiences, building common ground, respecting readers, and showing readers they are trying to understand them (56-60).

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz also claim that writers should decide on a claim early in the argument; the rest of their time should be spent testing and refining it. They suggest that a claim is not an argument until it is attached to reasons and premises that uphold it (38). Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz claim that persuasive writers know how to use sources well, how to introduce and tailor quotations, and how to shorten quoted passages. Even a well-shaped, well-supported argument loses effectiveness if readers find it dull or inappropriate (40).

While argument is certainly the most important component of student writing in the views of Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, and by extension something that good writing must do effectively, they also spend a considerable amount of time discussing style as it pertains to argument. Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz claim that manipulating style enables writers to shape readers' responses to their ideas. For example, they suggest that repetition and parallelism give sentences power (41), and that style must stay modulated or it will lose effectiveness (41). Additionally, Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz suggest that the tone and spirit of an argument are intimately related to subject matter, and thus argue that style should not be a last minute consideration (41).

Style, like argument, depends very much on context – an idea that gives Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz's argument use far beyond academia. Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz also spend considerably more time than Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst discussing audience, claiming that it is essential to know one's audience and to be respectful of it even as you argue strenuously to make your case (298), an idea that can easily be extended beyond academic writing. Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz also claim that different arguments serve different readers and occasions. The effectiveness of an argument depends not only on the purpose of the writer, but also on the context surrounding the plea and the people it seeks most directly to reach (11). This supports a social constructivist view of writing, aligning with the belief that one must know her audience as well as the conventions of the discourse in which she is writing in order for her writing to be successful.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz also suggest that the relationship between a writer and her readers is not a static one, but rather always in flux. As such, it is important to learn the territory. Little is neutral, they claim, so writers must both learn about their readers and consider how and whether to tell their readers who they are (30). Creating a bond with readers involves building trust (31). To connect to their audiences, writers must also regain authority over their subject matter, earning them the right to write and be read (32). This focus on authority and authenticity is expressivist in nature, as these are qualities expressivist theorists consider essential to successful student writing.

Many of the qualities of writing valued in this text, including defining and solving a rhetorical problem, connecting with one's audience, authority, and authenticity are attributes that are also valued in successful business writing. In addition, Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz's second definition of argument, a text designed to convince others or

oneself that specific facts are reliable or that other views should be considered or at least tolerated, is indeed often the goal of the business writer. Thus, while seeking to prepare students to write successfully in academic settings, Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz are also helping to prepare students to write well in non-academic settings.

Overall, *Everything's an Argument*, like *They Say/ I Say*, emphasizes the need for students to successfully define and respond to rhetorical problems in order for their writing to be successful. Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz also stress the importance of audience, however, promoting the importance of looking at writing from a social standpoint. In addition, like expressivist composition theorists, their text places value on authority and authenticity in student work.

What can we learn from these texts?

Much can be learned from examining these popular composition texts. *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* is certainly the most traditional of the three, yet its inclusion of different strategies for different types of writing offers a practical solution to what for many may be a complicated problem. *They Say/I Say* and *Everything's an Argument* offer less expansive viewpoints, each focusing on one particular rhetorical strategy for composing effective texts. The first is a simple, yet effective, approach for summarizing and commenting on others' viewpoints, a skill that is essential to successful academic writing, but perhaps less so to writing that takes place outside of academic settings. From the sound of its title alone, *Everything's an Argument* seems like its usefulness may be limited to classroom settings, but in fact this text is the one that seems to have the widest range of possible applications. Writing that takes place inside of the classroom must

make explicit arguments, while almost all writing must make the second type of argument Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz discuss – the type designed to convince others or oneself that specific facts are reliable or that other views should be considered or at least tolerated.

Like examining the dominant composition instruction theories made clear certain characteristics that are valued in student writing, so do these texts favor certain traits through their respective emphases. Form comes into play in each text, but is never the emphasis, supporting the work of Peter Elbow, Lil Brannon, Beach and Friedrich⁷, and others, and reaffirming the belief of many composition instructors that form comes second to content. The ability to make a coherent argument and provide ample support is certainly a primary focus in each of these texts. To make this argument most effectively, one's purpose, audience, and style must also be considered. While these elements are given different emphasis in each text, they are discussed in each in the context of creating the most effective argument. While on the surface these texts seem very different, at their core they are very much the same. Each stresses the importance of correctly evaluating the rhetorical situation and defining and responding to the rhetorical problem.

5. Theories of Professional Writing

In order to compare the values of successful academic writing to those of successful business writing, I will now review professional writing theory and examine professional writing in practice. I will begin by addressing the importance of context in both the study and practice of professional writing. I will look at the nature of authorship

⁷ See Elbow "Writing with Power," Brannon et al. "The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education," and Beach and Friedrich "Response to Writing."

and readership within the context of professional writing, as well as the ways in which the professional writer is influenced by her context, including the institution for which she writes and the community within which she composes. Next, I will examine professional writing in practice, drawing upon an official text of the American Management Association, an international organization that provides management training and professional development, as well as style and voice documents I've used during my own experience as a professional writer. Finally, after concluding these sections, I will compare and contrast academic and professional writing. By looking at the ways that these two types of writing are similar and dissimilar, there is much to be learned about the ways in which our experiences writing as part of each community can inform our experiences writing as part of the other.

Theories of professional writing are best understood from a social constructivist viewpoint, one in which the writer and her work are viewed as part of a larger context. In fact, Patrick Dias and colleagues, researchers at Carleton University and McGill University, suggest that the increase in studies of writing that takes place in non-academic settings is an enactment of the social constructivist theory that writing is not a solitary act, but rather one that is socially influenced (Brodkey 414; Dias et al. 9). Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare write, "A full understanding of writers' processes and products cannot occur without close reference to their place and role in their particular contexts" (9). Further, Charles Bazerman, a significant contributor to the establishment of writing as a research field and perhaps best known for his work on genre studies, points out that no text can be fully understood without understanding the discipline for which it is created. He writes, "I could not understand what constituted an appropriate text in any

discipline without considering the social and intellectual activity which the text was part of" (4). Further, Bazerman claims that in order to examine the effectiveness of a text, he must be able to look at the context in which it is operating (4).

Understanding that workplace texts are highly influenced by the context in which they are produced also makes necessary the realization that these texts are significantly affected by the institutions for which they are produced. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare claim that it is important to realize that context alone is not what makes academic and professional writing different, but that social factors, procedures, regulations, and relationships also significantly influence the texts produced by writers in workplace settings. Additionally, writing practices must eventually comply with these institutional interests (Dias et al. 9). The successful workplace writer must learn to balance these often competing forces, satisfying the needs of the institution for which she writes, while also considering the needs of her audience and the ways in which her text both influences and is influenced by these factors.

While Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare suggest that professional discourse is highly influenced by sponsoring institutions, Carl G. Herndl, a scholar of rhetorical and critical theory and the rhetoric of science, claims that the two are inseparable. He writes, "Once we abandon the current traditional rhetoric's notion of writing as a neutral, apolitical skill, we must recognize that discourse is inseparable from institutions, from organizational structures, from disciplinary and professional knowledge claims and interests, and from the day-to-day interaction of workers" (354). Thus, institutions not only influence the texts created in workplace settings, but they also shape the entire

discourse, the social and institutional factors surrounding the text's writer and the context in which these texts are produced and interpreted.

The discourse in which workplace texts are created is very different from that in which academic texts are produced. Although composing within two very different contexts, the business writer, like the academic writer, is faced with the task of solving a rhetorical problem. Bazerman makes an important distinction between the rhetorical problem and the rhetorical situation, one that is helpful in understanding the task of the workplace writer. He defines the rhetorical problem as "the set of constraints and goals recognized by a person, framing a symbolic response within a rhetorical situation" (8). In distinction, Bazerman defines the rhetorical situation as "all the contextual factors shaping a moment in which a person feels called upon to make a symbolic statement" (8). Additionally, Bazerman claims that the writer's perception, motivation, and imaginative construction play a role in interpreting both, and that her desire to gain more information about the situation and the problem can lead to a better understating of the rhetorical problem she must solve (8).

While most professional writers would not find business writing tasks commonly referred to as attempts to solve rhetorical problems, doing so helps to highlight the fact that at their core academic and business writing do indeed have the same goal. Both academic and workplace writers must first define and then work towards solving rhetorical problems. The rhetorical situation, as Bazerman defines it, however, is very different for these two types of writers. Academic writers are most often asked to complete an assignment to the satisfaction of a single audience, the instructor. The

successful business writer, on the other hand, must often satisfy multiple audiences with varying interests.

Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare highlight the complexity of defining the rhetorical problem in workplace settings. They claim that while school writing tasks have single authors and relatively stable rhetorical aims, workplace texts are “but one strand in an intricate network of events, intentions, other texts, relationships, and readers” (113). Further, they claim that the rhetorical problem that the writer faces in workplace settings is institutional rather than individual (114). While this may often be the case, the rhetorical problem is one that frequently needs to be solved by the writer. This is further complicated by the fact that the workplace writer is faced with a multiplicity of rhetorical intentions. Dias, Freedman, Medway and Pare suggest that not only does the rhetorical problem come from the institution, but also that the rhetorical intentions are not the writer’s alone, but are “located in the workplace-community’s collective aspirations and goals” (115). This begins to explain why professional writing is often so complicated and a genre that is not easily transitioned into, as the writer must attempt to solve a problem that is not truly her own. Not only must the successful workplace writer solve a problem that she has not created, she must solve it to the satisfaction of everyone in the community in which she writes.

It is the constant need to balance her own intentions, as well as those of her institution and community, that is the rhetorical problem the professional writer often faces. Indeed, Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare suggest that the complexity of workplace writing arises from the subtle interplay between often competing social motives (222). They argue that “learning to write in particular contexts is

indistinguishable from learning to participate in the full range of actions that constitute the activity in those contexts” (220). This is further complicated by the institutional influences that shape the discourses that the writers must learn to participate in.

In addition to learning the conventions of a new discourse, the successful workplace writer must also learn to satisfy multiple audiences. C. H. Knoblauch, a scholar of rhetorical theory, language and discourse, addresses this complicated task, describing the rhetorical challenge of the business executive as one that must meet many different expectations. He writes, “These writers set out to achieve several conflicting purposes simultaneously while responding to the needs of several, quite different, intended readers, each with different expectations of the writing” (155). Knoblauch also claims that well-reasoned arguments do not guarantee success, and that accuracy means little if the intended audience fails to comprehend the writer’s message (156). The rhetorical problem is further complicated when the writer must satisfy both the needs of firm and client, in which case she must balance the needs, motives, and pressures of each group (Knoblauch 156). Thus, business writing must meet the expectations of all involved in order to be successful. It must be both understood by all parties involved and meet each of their unique expectations.

Indeed, it is the notion of audience that accounts for many of the differences between academic and workplace writing, as well as many of the challenges the workplace writer encounters. While academic writing most often has a single, defined reader, the instructor, professional writers must often address, and satisfy, multiple readers. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare claim that the notion of audience as we commonly understand it does not begin to explain the multiplicity of readers and reader

expectations associated with workplace writing (115). As such, any analysis of reading practices in the workplace is limited, because specification of the range of readers over time is nearly impossible (Dias et al. 115). This further complicates the task of the workplace writer, as she must not only satisfy multiple audiences, but is often writing to meet the need of an audience that has yet to be fully defined.

Ede and Lunsford's work on addressed and invoked audiences offers some perspective here. Ede and Lunsford, professors at Oregon State University and Stanford University, respectively, and whose collaborative work includes scholarship on the role of audience as well as research on collaborative writing, claim that it is the writer who must establish the range of potential roles an audience may play (166). Her ability to do so comes from careful consideration of the specifics of the rhetorical problem. Further, Ede and Lunsford claim that writers must adapt their writing to meet the needs and expectations of the addressed audience, information that may be drawn from past experience (166). Like the rhetorical problem is influenced by the writer's community, however, so is the notion of audience. Ede and Lunsford claim that a fully elaborated view of audience must balance the creativity of writer and reader and account for the shifting range of roles of both the addressed and invoked audiences (170). Thus, by defining the rhetorical problem, the writer must be able to anticipate and meet the needs of her audience. At the same time, however, through consideration of her audience invoked, she may make clear in her writing the role she wants her audience to play.

Audience is not the only significant way in which professional writing varies from academic writing; the nature of authorship is also quite different. Much of the writing that takes place in professional settings is collaborative, meaning that it is composed by

more than one person or that it is edited and added on to by a chain of people. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare point out that not only is this type of collaboration uncommon in academic settings, but that in most cases it wouldn't be allowed. Writing in teams, leaving research unattributed, and claiming authorship for the texts of others are all common occurrences in the workplace, but are activities that are not allowed, and often even punishable, if they occur in academic settings (115).

Reading practices also differ significantly between academic and business texts. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare call attention to what they call document cycling, a process through which texts are encountered by different readers, each of whom may have different intentions and may add to or edit the original text (224). While texts may ultimately be produced through a collaboration of many individuals, Anne Beaufort, a professor and scholar whose work includes research on writers entering new discourse communities, reminds us that these texts most often reflect the view of the institution, not of these individuals (5). Thus, the successful business writer must balance all of these influences – the institution, the discourse community, and those collaborating on the text.

Indeed, successful workplace writing is largely about balance. Professional writers may benefit, however, from their own prior experience working within a particular genre. Bazerman suggests that a genre's regularities come from its own historical presence, and that by examining existing models, writers can find solutions to recurring rhetorical problems. To do so, it's important for writers to recognize the regularities within a genre, as certain features may emerge as solutions to the rhetorical problem at hand (10). As these solutions become familiar and accepted, they also gain institutional force (8). Bazerman writes, "History continues with each new text invoking

the genre” (8). Like Bartholomae claims students must learn to imitate the conventions of a discourse to fully participate, Bazerman argues that they must also understand the rhetorical choices “embedded in each generic habit” in order to master the genre (8). Thus, through increased experience and familiarity with a genre, the workplace writer can begin to master the process of defining the rhetorical problem, perhaps internalizing the problem solving process, which can then be called upon for later use.

Beaufort points out that genres may be shared by several discourse communities. As a result, a writer may come to a new community and already have some knowledge of the genre. This cannot be oversimplified, though, as much like Haswell points out that all of the disciplines within academia have their own unique rules and conventions⁸, so does Beaufort caution that while workplace genres may have much in common, each remains unique. Thus, she cautions the writer to be sensitive to the ways in which each genre has been tailored to each community of writers and readers (70). Again, balance is stressed as an integral skill for the workplace writer, as she may draw upon past knowledge of the genre to simplify a new writing task, but must still consider the unique features of the particular genre’s audience and discourse community.

Like Beaufort claims that a writer can benefit from having genre knowledge, Linda Flower suggests that she may also benefit from possessing topic knowledge. Flower’s examination of the writing process as it pertains to professional writing leads to her claim that having topic knowledge acts as a framework, providing a ready-made plan for organizing discourse. She also points out, however, that professional writing is full of

⁸ See Haswell “The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing; Or, Looking for Shortcuts via the Road of Excess.”

situations where this knowledge is not enough to produce good writing. Even if a writer possesses this knowledge, she still may fail if she is unwilling or unable to simulate the response of a reader other than herself. Thus, the successful workplace writer needs to be able to imagine the interpretive process of a reader other than herself, and the way in which she structures the knowledge she is providing must match that of the reader (8-9).

Flower also claims that when topic knowledge and genre knowledge aren't enough to complete the task at hand, successful writers rise to rhetorical problem solving. She calls this a "more expensive, effortful cognitive process," but claims that it is more powerful and more flexible than relying on topic knowledge. When professional writers approach writing this way, Flower claims that they explore the problem, generate goals, notice constraints of their own plans, re-plan and re-think (9).

It is this ability to explore the problem with full awareness of outside influences as well as the writer's own constraints that separates the successful workplace writer from the unsuccessful one. Beaufort offers five important distinctions between successful and unsuccessful workplace writers, addressing these five critical domains of business writing: discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and writing process knowledge. These conclusions grew out of her study of four writers' transitions from academic to professional settings and the ways in which they learned to meet the needs of their new professional contexts. Beaufort used ethnography to document these writers' experiences over the course of a one year period in order to examine the ways in which writers are socialized into communicating within the conventions of new workplace discourses. By analyzing the way these four writers drew upon knowledge in specific writing situations, Beaufort is able to make several

important conclusions about the ways in which writing skills are developed both in school and beyond.

In regards to discourse community knowledge, Beaufort found that expert writers possess tacit knowledge of the community's norms, while novice writers have little awareness of discourse communities. Similarly, her conclusion about genre knowledge is that experts recycle texts if a genre is familiar and they focus on deep structure and purpose of the genre that are versatile in many genres and subgenres. Novice writers, on the other hand, approach each text as a first. They focus on surface features of the genre and bridge from more familiar genres (75). Beaufort suggests that while in the process of gaining expertise, these novice writers attempt to "borrow" from knowledge obtained in other writing situations as a way to get started until they are able to fully understand and work within their new discourse (76). Thus, like Bizzell, Bartholomae, and Shaughnessy claim basic writers struggle with academic writing because they are unfamiliar with the discourse⁹, Beaufort claims the same is true of novice professional writers. This suggests that what is needed by novice writers in both contexts is a better understanding of the rhetorical problem and the rhetorical situation.

Similarly, Beaufort found that when it comes to subject matter knowledge, experts create new content based on insider knowledge and use specialized vocabulary appropriately, while novice writers borrow content from existing documents. They use everyday vocabulary or use specialized vocabulary awkwardly. Expert writers also possess more rhetorical knowledge than novice writers. They write from the point of

⁹ See Bizzell "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing," Bartholomae "Inventing the University," and Shaughnessy "Diving in: An Introduction to Basic Writing."

view of an institution and focus on audience needs and social context, writing towards institutional goals. Novice writers write from a personal point of view, focusing on a generic audience and matters of correctness. They take pride in authorship, something successful writers must learn to put aside to best represent the institution's goals and audience's needs. Finally, expert writers possess more knowledge of the writing process, and know how to adapt it for specific tasks. They work well under pressure. Novice writers use similar processes for all writing tasks. As a result, writing tasks are labor intensive – hard to get started and easily side-tracked (Beaufort 75).

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from Beaufort's study and from this overview of professional writing theory is that like successful academic writers, successful workplace writers must define and satisfy rhetorical problems. Workplace writers, however, work within an entirely different context, one in which the successful writer must learn to anticipate and meet the needs of varied audiences, while at the same time balancing those needs with the goals and influences of the institutions in which they work. This task is at once simplified and complicated by the writer's own prior experience working within a particular genre. While past experience makes it easier for the writer to approach and define the rhetorical problem, the successful writer must also look at each new situation specifically, carefully considering the unique needs of each task's many audiences.

6. Professional Writing in Practice

About workplace texts, Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare write, "Though individuals may appear to control invention, arrangement, and style, most workplace

authors follow a host of implicit and explicit rhetorical rules; successful compliance marks membership, failure may mean career stagnation or job loss” (115). Indeed, it is this adherence to style, convention, and rhetorical rules that defines the writing of the workplace writer. In order to be successful, the workplace writer must constantly compromise – acting less as author and more as translator – successfully reworking a message that is often not her own, and making it fit a mold that she has often had little, if any, role in deciding.

This is what I will now take a closer look at – professional writing in practice. I will do so through two different approaches. First, I will examine the American Management Association’s business writing handbook, which is a tool designed as a reference for workplace writers. By looking at this guide’s areas of emphasis, I will highlight what this organization considers the most important aspects of workplace writing to be. Next, I will examine several businesses writing style guides that I have encountered through my own experience as a professional writer. Here, I hope to provide a closer look at professional writing in practice, highlighting the everyday expectations of the workplace writer and the ways in which these expectations shape her writing.

While not a substitute for an examination of business writing in practice, *The AMA Handbook of Business Writing* helps us begin to look at writing from the point of view of business professionals. Its authors, Kevin Wilson and Jennifer Wauson, are vice president and president, respectively, of a company that specializes in training administrative professionals. This text offers an effective complement to the three academic texts previously discussed, as it is written not from the point of view of

academic writers or professors, but rather from the viewpoint of business professionals. Thus, the authors represent the types of professionals that evaluate workplace writing.

The *AMA Handbook of Business Writing* claims to be a “desktop job aid for all corporate communicators” (xxv). This guide is informed by corporate writing guidelines from the authors’ experiences working for many Fortune 500 companies. Wilson and Wauson claim that this guide is designed for many different types of corporate communicators, including writers and managers in corporate communications, marketing, sales, human resources, and training, as well as technical writers, grant writers, public relations writers, and administrative assistants. Its focus is clearly on style, and it includes information about grammar, usage, punctuation, language construction, formatting, and business documents (xxv). This focus on style indicates that one of the most important aspects of business writing is the way in which ideas are presented, an idea that I can support with my own experience and one I will look at in more detail later when examining the style guides I’ve worked with.

The AMA Handbook of Business Writing provides an overview of the writing process, which it defines as beginning with audience analysis and ending with documenting sources. The steps are as follows: audience analysis, brainstorming, research, interviewing, outlining, writing a draft, using visuals, page design, publication design, editing, proofreading, document review, revisions, and documenting sources (3-24). While this process has much in common with that used in composing academic texts, like beginning with brainstorming and ending with citing sources, it also has several steps one would not utilize in academic settings, like document and publication design. Like the guide’s focus on style, this also supports the idea that presentation of ideas is critical

in business settings, and suggests that one of the major transitions that academic writers must make is the way in which they present information.

The *AMA Handbook of Business Writing* also contains many samples of business documents. This section includes everything from acceptance and commendation letters to instructions, grant proposals, job descriptions, meeting minutes, newsletters, press releases, memorandum reports, user guides, and white papers. While these examples are provided to illustrate different styles and formatting of business texts, they also represent successful writing within the discourse, acting as templates that students may use to mimic its rhetorical conventions.

About business writing style, Wilson and Wauson claim that the overall tone of the business document, as seen through word choice, reflects the writer's attitude (13), and I would add that it reflects the organization's attitude as well. Business writers must consider the overall tone of their message and pay constant attention to word choice and connotation. These are important lessons that every business writer must learn, and something I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

To take a closer look at professional writing in practice, I will now discuss some of the common features and goals of several businesses writing style guides that I've used to produce workplace texts. These documents illustrate the idea that workplace writing has much to do with convention, and that in many cases the writer serves less as a creative contributor and more as a representative of the views and goals of the institution for which she works. Thus, it becomes the writer's job not only to create content, but to accurately and consistently portray each brand's image, which is done through adhering

to the conventions of that brand. These conventions are often explicitly detailed in style and voice documents, documents that describe the type of voice the copywriter is to use in order to accurately reflect the brand's image and value propositions.

The documents that I will examine represent several major e-commerce brands. In the interest of protecting these brands' privacy, I will not disclose the names of the brands, and I will present my findings in a way that's collective, rather than discussing specifics about any one of them. While this will not serve to accurately reflect each brand's voice and vision, that is not my intention here. Rather, by looking at these style guides together, I hope to paint an overall picture about the ways in which writing is used in the workplace. When it is necessary to present more specific information, I will use pseudonyms in referring to these brands.

What is immediately clear from looking at these style guides is that the most important part of each is the establishment of the respective brand's voice. Each guide clearly defines not only the type of voice that the writing should embody, but also the voice of the brand itself. For example, Tulip is a brand that positions itself based on convenience, offering everyday essentials conveniently shipped to its customers' doors. Tulip's brand positioning statement indicates that this brand should be viewed as "accessible," and the voice document its writers are provided with indicates that its written content must have an "inviting" tone. This implies that one leads to the other, that the brand voice is a guiding principle, one that is upheld by the voice of the writer. "Accessibility," a characteristic the brand wants to embody, is something that is suggested, not something that can be explicitly stated. Thus, the guide lists "accessibility"

as a brand attribute, and suggests “inviting” as a voice attribute, something that the writer’s texts should embody to help portray the brand as “accessible.”

While representing a core brand value through a specific voice attribute may not appear to be a particularly difficult task, the guide for the Tulip Company goes on to list eight total brand attributes paired with eight total voice attributes. As a result, the voice of each text that the writer produces must take on eight characteristics simultaneously to accurately portray the brand, certainly a more complicated task. This is what Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare mean when they discuss the multiplicity of rhetorical intentions¹⁰. In this case, the writer must balance all eight attributes to accurately reflect the brand’s voice in her writing, while also balancing her own rhetorical intentions with those of the institution and of her professional discourse community.

Accurately positioning a brand while still meeting the needs of one’s reader is a complicated task. This is further complicated in the instance of brand families, a term that refers to the e-commerce practice of a single company owning and operating multiple websites under one connecting brand. In this case, there is often more than one level of positioning involved. Each website has its own voice and personality, but there must also be common attributes that not only link them together, but give each website a familiar voice that visitors from one of the brand’s other websites will recognize. At the same time, each site is positioned somewhat differently so its voice must be unique. This is represented in the style guide as site voice vs. brand voice. For example, Tulip.com positions itself as “casual,” while Orchid.com is positioned as “sophisticated.” Both,

¹⁰ See Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*.

however, fall under the umbrella of the brand Greenhouse, and as such must maintain a voice that is “authentic.” Thus, the texts produced for either one of these websites must not only balance the competing influences of that particular website, but also those of the brand as a whole.

Equally important to establishing the brand’s voice is defining its intended audience. As I established in the last section, a focus on context and audience needs is among the characteristics that separate successful workplace writing from unsuccessful workplace writing. Each guide I examined explicitly defines its audience, highlighting its characteristics and shopping habits. This is essential to the writer’s ability to respond to the rhetorical problem. Knowing the target audience enables the writer to best consider her audience’s needs, as well as to balance them with those of the sponsoring institution for which she is writing.

Like writing must vary to accomplish different tasks successfully, style guides vary greatly depending on their intended use. Those that are meant to be used as a guide for all writing that takes place within a particular organization are primarily devoted to brand positioning, as the types of writing tasks they may be used as a reference for are very diverse. Other guides are intended for more specific purposes. For example, one of the guides I studied was intended specifically for use in composing product descriptions. While this guide made mention of the brand’s overall voice and positioning, its primary focus was the exact components that each description must contain. For example, directions on how to use a product are a common element in online product descriptions. This guide not only indicated that this must be included, but dictated exactly where in the

description this must be done, a specific way the subheading must be worded, and how the information should be formatted.

Style is also an important part of each guide, and all of the guides I examined addressed surface-level style elements to some degree, including comma and hyphen usage, capitalization, and formatting specifications. While much of this has to do with consistency, it is also interesting to consider that formatting and style play such a significant role in the daily tasks of the workplace writer, yet she often has little say in the creation of such guidelines, nor any explanation as to how they were developed. She must accept them for what they are, standards of her workplace genre, and internalize them in order to fully participate in the discourse of her workplace.

For example, the style guide for Rouge, an online retailer of high end cosmetic products, includes more general rules, like instructing its writers to be concise and never to make a guarantee, while also containing largely unexplained style rules like not to use periods in headings, never to use exclamation points, and that the text included in bulleted points should be concise and not written in complete sentences. A guide for another website was even more exact in its rules regarding bulleted points, suggesting that the text included in bulleted lists should never be more than eight words long. Rules like these, no matter how specific or trivial they may seem, play an integral role in defining the conventions of each brand. It is within these conventions that the writer must produce her texts, and each of her texts must comply with all of the rules and conventions of the brand for which it is composed in order for it to be considered successful.

Finally, much like *The AMA Handbook of Business Writing* provides sample business documents that serve as examples of successful texts, many of the guides I examined provide examples from other websites and brands of what the company considers to be a successful portrayal of one of its key attributes. Like the samples in *The AMA Handbook of Business Writing*, these serve as tools for learning to mimic the discourse, examples the writer may imitate to successfully participate in the discourse and complete the transition from academic to workplace writer. As Bartholomae suggests, imitation is key in learning to master a genre and to being accepted as a member of a discourse community (408). Both the *The AMA Handbook of Business Writing* and the style guides that I've studied provide sample texts to imitate, thus functioning as points of access to the professional discourse.

What the style guides also make clear is the importance of balancing the multiplicity of rhetorical intentions, as well as audience and institutional needs. The successful workplace writer must balance the needs of her audience with those of her institution and accomplish both within the confines of the conventions of her workplace discourse. This is further complicated when multiple layers of positioning are involved, in which case the writer must balance the needs of multiple channels of messaging from her institution, in addition to the needs of her readers and the conventions of her discourse community. Thus, professional writing in practice clearly aligns with Knoblauch's description of the rhetorical challenge of business writers, who he claims "set out to achieve several conflicting purposes simultaneously while responding to the needs of several, quite different, intended readers, each with different expectations of the writing" (155). It is very much a balancing act, one in which the writer must find a way to

produce a text that meets the needs and expectations of all those involved, while functioning within the confines and conventions of the discourse and the genre.

7. Conclusions and Implications

Comparing academic and business writing reveals several key differences. Academic writing is more often than not the work of a single author and is reviewed by a single reader. Good academic writing demonstrates knowledge and critical thinking. It is evaluated based on the degree to which it satisfies an instructor's particular assignment. Business writing, on the other hand, is often produced collaboratively. It must balance the goals of multiple constituents and represent a sponsoring institution, while also meeting the needs of a third party – a customer, client, or end-user. Business writing is evaluated based on the extent to which it successfully balances this multiplicity of needs and satisfies both the sponsoring institution and the third-party end-user. What this study also reveals, however, is the extent to which academic and business writing are also very similar. At their core, both types of writing define and respond to rhetorical problems, and it is the extent to which they solve these problems that defines success in both business and academic settings.

To provide a closer look at the ways in which academic and business writing are both similar and different, I will examine each of the values of good writing I've identified thus far and discuss how each is unique to an academic or business setting or common to both. The values of successful writing derived from my examination of academic writing theory and practice are: mechanical and grammatical correctness, form and organization, the importance of recursion in the writing process, authority, integrity,

and spontaneity. My review of professional writing theory and practice revealed the following primary values of business writing: the need to satisfy a multiplicity of audiences, write towards institutional goals, and balance the needs of the audience and sponsoring organization. After discussing how academic and business settings incorporate or fail to incorporate these values, I will take a closer look at the three attributes that I've determined successful writing in both of these contexts share: defining and responding to the rhetorical problem, satisfying the audience, and operating within the conventions of the discourse.

Successful Writing Values

In responding to each of the writing values I've identified, I drawn upon both the academic and professional writing scholarship I've previously discussed, as well as my own experience as an e-commerce copywriter. While I don't intend my experience to be representative of all of the types of writing that takes place in business settings, I do believe that I can provide a useful perspective, as I've spent the last two years participating in both academic and business discourses simultaneously.

Mechanical and Grammatical Correctness

Formalists value writing's accuracy, placing great emphasis on mechanical and grammatical correctness. This value is shared, to some extent, by business writers. Both academic and business writers must achieve a certain level of mechanical and grammatical correctness, because it directly impacts clarity of prose. While some types of business writing, like academic writing, call for strict adherence to grammar rules, other types do not. For example, as a copywriter I've found that while certain elements of

mechanical correctness, like spelling, are valued, others, like grammatically correct sentences, are not. This varies greatly by situation, but in e-commerce writing sentence fragments are certainly privileged over run-ons, and sometimes also over grammatically correct sentences. This is due to the need for e-commerce writing to be concise and scannable. As a result, simple sentence structure is valued. This value is largely derived from studies of website usability and user engagement. For example, only 16% of users read a web page word by word (Nielsen), and the average user only reads only about 18% of a web page's content (Weinrich). Thus, e-commerce writing must be concise, something that is quite often achieved through writing that is not entirely mechanically or grammatically correct.

Other forms of business writing, however, like reports and newsletters, require a higher level of mechanical and grammatical correctness, one that is similar to the correctness expected of academic writing. In fact, the *AMA Handbook of Business Writing* includes a significant number of lessons on grammar, punctuation, and usage, confirming the notion that correctness is valued in business texts. Thus, it is not accurate to claim that grammatical and mechanical correctness are not important values in business writing, but it is reasonable to conclude that their importance varies by context.

Form and Organization

The formalists also value form and organization. Indeed, these writing attributes are still valued throughout many academic settings, as the way in which information is presented is valued as a critical part of the discourse. For example, MLA and APA formatting guidelines explicitly detail how writing must be presented. Each is

representative of the rules of a specific discourse - MLA for the liberal arts and humanities and APA for the social sciences. These guidelines must be followed for a writer's paper to be accepted as successful in her particular discourse.

My experience in business settings is that form and organization are important to the extent that documents are easy to follow along with and understand. Like the correct academic form to use varies by discipline, so does the correct form for business documents vary by type of writing task and by situation. In addition to the correct form varying by task, the degree to which form is valued also depends on the type of writing being done, the purpose, and the audience.

In the context of e-commerce copywriting, form is not significant because much of the text that goes online is first reformatted by designers, programmers, and user experience professionals. On the other hand, writers may be called upon to format some of the text themselves, inserting html code, tags that define the structure and layout of a web document, so that text displays correctly online. Here, while the text doesn't appear in a way that's reflective of its final form, the writer, like the student, has an active role in its presentation.

The *AMA Handbook of Business Writing* devotes an entire section, over 200 pages, to presenting readers with sample business documents. These documents serve as examples of how writers should format and present different types of business texts, and indeed I have encountered the need to format documents in adherence to specific guidelines in my own professional experience as well. Thus, while form may not be

valued in every business context, it would be incorrect to claim that it does not have significance in business settings.

Writing as a Recursive Process

The cognitivists view writing as a recursive process and value revision and re-working of texts. They encourage the use of drafts so that students may receive and incorporate this feedback into their work. In my experience, business writing is also a recursive process. I will often produce multiple drafts of my work before submitting it to my manager. Like an instructor, a manager may provide feedback about how to improve what I've written or suggest things to be eliminated or added. Other times, a manager may add to, delete from, or edit a text herself and then pass it along to another person. This is what Dias, Freedman, Medway and Pare refer to as document cycling, a process through which texts are encountered by different readers, each of whom may have different intentions and may add to or edit the original text (224). While this may still be viewed as a recursive process, the writer's role becomes limited and at a certain point she becomes separated from her text. Thus, business and academic writing can both be said to be recursive, though in many cases they are not recursive in the same ways. When a writer receives feedback from a manager in order to improve her work it may contribute to the personal development the cognitivists hope to achieve through process writing, but when a manager adds to or changes a text, often without the writer's input, the process can still be said to be recursive but it is certainly not so for the same reasons. In this case, the writing process is not recursive in order to support the writer's growth, but rather it is recursive as part of an effort to produce the best possible version of a final written product.

Authority and Integrity

The expressivists value authority and integrity in writing. Murray defines authority in writing as writing that is specific, accurate, and honest (“The Handout Page” 79). Authority is also valued in business writing, but like many of the characteristics I’ve discussed thus far, the ways in which authority is valued in business settings are quite different than the ways in which it is valued in academic settings.

Workplace writing must have authority in that it must be influential, specific, accurate, and honest. It differs from academic writing, however, in that business writing must be authoritative, but it does not represent the writer’s authority. Rather, it represents the authority of the organization for which she works. As Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare point out, workplace writing is significantly influenced by social factors, procedures, regulations, and relationships, and must eventually comply with these institutional interests (9). Similarly, in regards to honesty, the writer’s work must be honest not in that it accurately reflects the writer’s intentions, but rather in the way it represents the views of the sponsoring organization.

Spontaneity

One could make an argument that spontaneity is valued in business writing to the extent that the writer is able to perform in ad hoc situations, but it would be unrealistic to say that it is valued in the same way that the expressivists value spontaneity in student writing. Spontaneity is not valued in business writing because it explores ideas or leads to personal growth, and false starts would certainly not be exposed in business texts. In fact, both *The Business Writer’s Handbook* and *The AMA Handbook of Business Writing*

provide revision checklists, which include accuracy, coherence, consistent usage, and grammar and typographical errors (Alred, Brusaw and Oliu 577; Wilson and Wauson 19). Certainly this is an indication that business writing needs to be, and is expected to be polished, an idea I can further support with my own experience that business contexts value product over process and thus a polished piece of writing is expected.

Multiplicity of Audience Needs

Academic writing must satisfy an intended audience, but under most circumstances it does not need to balance a multiplicity of audience needs. Most academic writing tasks are completed in response to an assignment, and while they must meet certain criteria, the needs of the audience are clear. Business writing, on the other hand, must commonly satisfy multiple audiences and meet a multiplicity of needs. In fact, Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare claim that the notion of audience as we commonly understand it does not begin to explain the multiplicity of readers and reader expectations associated with workplace writing (115). Thus, while it is fair to say that all writing must meet the needs of its audience, the nature of that audience, like many of the writing values discussed thus far, varies significantly by context.

Writing towards Institutional Goals

Writing towards institutional goals is a value that distinctly belongs to business writing. Business writers must accurately represent the values of their sponsoring organizations and work towards meeting those institutions' goals. Academic writers must also meet goals, but these goals are their own. In some cases, the instructor and her

assignment could be said to represent the institution, the university, but even from this viewpoint, the writer's text still represents its writer, not a sponsoring organization.

Balancing the Needs of Institution and Audience

All successful writing must consider its audience, but the situations in which it must be composed with consideration to both its audience and its sponsoring institution are unique. This is certainly the case with business writing, as I've just discussed, but can the same be said of academic writing? Certainly student writing done in academic settings does not need to fulfill both needs, but very possibly writing done by instructors and faculty does need to satisfy its audience, while also serving a need of the sponsoring institution, the university. Thus, while business writing regularly must balance the needs of its audience and its institution, this quality is not entirely unique to business settings.

Shared Writing Values

While the writing values I have just discussed are representative of the ways in which academic and business writing differ, whether innately or by context, there are also three values of good writing that are shared by both academic and business settings. These are: defining and responding to the rhetorical problem, satisfying the audience, and operating within the conventions of the discourse.

Rhetorical Problem Response

While the discourse in which workplace texts are created is very different from that in which academic texts are produced, the business writer, like the academic writer, is faced with the task of solving a rhetorical problem. Flower and Hayes' study of

writers' cognitive processes revealed that good writers respond to all aspects of the rhetorical problem by building a unique representation of their audience and assignment, as well as their goals involving the audience, their own persona, and the text (474-5). Good writers continue to develop an image of the reader, the situation, and their goals with increasing detail, while poor writers continue writing with the underdeveloped representation of the problem they started with (Flower and Hayes 476). While Flower and Hayes' work is often viewed within the context of academic writing, their ideas and conclusions hold true in business contexts as well. Good writing, whether the work of a student or a business writer, defines and responds to a rhetorical problem, and it comes as the result of a recursive process through which successful writers continually redefine the problem their writing is attempting to solve. Good writers, both business and academic, satisfy the intent of the assignment or task at hand and meet the needs of their audience(s).

Audience and many other factors that make up the rhetorical situations in which writers compose texts may differ between academic and business settings, but at the most basic level both types of writers are indeed defining and solving rhetorical problems. Solving the rhetorical problem may be more complex for business writers, because of the multiplicity of needs and intentions (Dias et al.; Knoblauch), but like academic writers, this is what they must do in order to be successful. At their core, both business and academic writing define and respond to rhetorical problems, and it is the extent to which their writers solve these problems that defines success in both contexts.

Satisfying the Audience

While academic and business writers have very different audiences, both types of writers must satisfy these audiences in order for their writing to be considered successful. Just as the rhetorical problem is influenced by the writer's community, however, so is the notion of audience. In most cases the audience of a student's academic writing is easily defined as the instructor, while in business settings there are often multiple audiences to be satisfied and a multiplicity of goals to be balanced. While audiences differ greatly between these two settings, no instance of business or academic writing can be considered successful if it does not satisfy its audience(s). If an instructor is not satisfied with a student's completion of an assignment, her lack of satisfaction is seen in a poor grade. Similarly, if a business writer fails to satisfy her audience, her writing also fails to be successful. It does not affect its audience as its author intended, whether that effect is persuading someone to buy a product, make a certain decision, or bring about a particular result. Additionally, if the writer fails to satisfy her initial audience, her manager, her text fails to make any impression on her end-user because that end-user never sees her text.

Operating within the Conventions of the Discourse

The success of one's writing can only be evaluated within the particular discourse in which it is composed. As a result, to be successful a writer must familiarize herself with the discourse she is writing as a part of. Academic and business writers compose texts as part of two very different discourses, but both must compose within the conventions of their respective discourses in order to be successful. Academic writers must abide by the rules of the disciplines in which they study, while also taking into

account the rules of their instructors and specifications of their assignments. Style and formatting guidelines, like those provided by MLA and APA, are examples of the conventions of the discourse and provide students with rules that writing within their particular discourse must follow.

Similarly, business writing must adhere to the conventions of its genre. The genre not only indicates the form the writing should take, but also plays a role in defining the audience and the institution's expectations. Thus, both types of writers, in order to be successful, must write within the conventions of their particular discourse. To do so, they must understand the rules and conventions of that discourse and satisfy the needs of an audience that is also influenced by the discourse.

Implications

One of the most important implications of this study is that while students must learn the conventions of a new discourse to successfully transition from writing in academic settings to writing in the business world, many values of successful writing are shared by both settings. Indeed, school writing serves as the foundation for business writing, and while writing skills may not be called upon in the same ways in the business world, the knowledge must be there to be called upon. The university is where writers must learn to successfully produce texts, as most employers do not teach new employees how to be successful writers, yet expect them to be able to write successfully.

In regards to business and academic writing, Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare claim that while one doesn't prepare a student for the other, schools afford space and time to learn theoretical concepts that are also required for workplace writing, as well as the

opportunity to be critical of received notions, consider alternatives, speculate, and hypothesize (223). These are skills the workplace demands, but not skills that it teaches. Thus, while we must accept that success is defined differently in academic and business settings, academic writing skills go a long way in preparing students to be successful in the workplace, even if they do so somewhat indirectly.

The workplace is where the transitioning writer must learn the conventions of her new discourse, but she must enter into it already knowing how to write successfully. Business writers and managers can also benefit from this viewpoint. This knowledge can help them help new business writers complete their transitions to the workplace through an increased focus on the conventions of the discourse, rather than assuming the writer needs training in the act of writing itself or that she needs no training at all. These experienced professionals can help new writers understand the conventions of the business writing discourse so that they too may learn to approach business writing tasks as just another writing assignment with a specific audience and goal in mind, a rhetorical problem they've already been trained to solve.

My work leads me to conclude that academic writers and business writers are indeed trying to solve the same problem. When I began comparing academic writing and business writing I was under the impression that the two had little in common and that academic writers and business writers needed two very different types of training in order to be successful. My study of these two types of writing, however, shows that both types of writers must define and respond to rhetorical problems, satisfy their audience(s), and work within the conventions of the discourse in which they are writing. Through an increased focus on what I have identified as the three values shared by successful writing

in both contexts, instructors can help students learn to write in a way that considers their purpose and audience – a skill that is transferable to any writing endeavor regardless of context. Consequently, instruction that prepares students to write well in academic settings and instruction that prepares them to be successful writers in business contexts can take place simultaneously. Thus, instructors can begin to teach students to write successfully in business settings without having to focus specifically on workplace writing and without taking time and attention away from literature, creative writing, critical thinking and analysis, and other important areas of focus that support their students' individual growth as writers. This is not to say that those students who know that they want careers in business or communication fields will not benefit from classes dedicated entirely to professional writing instruction, but rather that all students who will need to do any type of on-the-job writing can benefit from writing instruction that focuses on the writing values shared by both academic and business settings.

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