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Disciplinary and Professional Identities are Constructed Through Writing

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from Other Texts”). Assigned to write an essay, for example, writers summon up the features of an essay they’ve used in the past or learned about by reading and talking about the essay genre. Likewise, a student writing an argument draws on prior knowledge or experience with producing such a text, including perhaps how to organize an argument for maximum effect. Other writers may draw on something written in the past for a new purpose.

In some instances, prior knowledge and experience are necessary and often helpful; in others they can work against writers. When writers call on strategies they have used before when approaching a new writing task, those strategies may or may not work well in the current situation. In studying college student writers’ responses to first-year assignments, for example, Linda Flower found that students tended to rely on a strategy she called “gist and list” (essentially making a point [the gist] and then listing a series of supporting statements) whether that strategy was an effective one or not (Flower et al. 1990). When writers can identify how elements of one writing situation are similar to elements of another, their prior knowledge helps them out in analyzing the current rhetorical situation. But when they simply rely on a strategy or genre or convention out of habit, that prior knowledge may not be helpful at all.

3.4

DISCIPLINARY AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES ARE CONSTRUCTED THROUGH WRITING

Heidi Estrem

While people can negotiate how identities are constructed through writing in a variety of contexts (see 3.1, “Writing Is Linked to Identity”), many first encounter unfamiliar disciplinary (or professional) discourse in college. In most American colleges and universities in the United States, students complete general education courses (introductory courses designed to introduce students to both ways of thinking and disciplinary perspectives within the university) before continuing on to specialized courses within their chosen disciplines or fields. This increasingly discipline-specific learning process involves both the simple acquisition of new knowledge and an “expansion and transformation of identity, of a learner’s ‘sense of self’” (Meyer and Land 2006, 11). Writing—as a means of thinking, a form of inquiry and research, and a means for communication within a discipline—plays a critical

role in that identity transformation and expansion. Disciplines have particular ways of asking and investigating questions enacted through and demonstrated in writing; teachers or researchers demonstrate their memberships in disciplines by using writing in ways validated by disciplines. It is thus through writing that disciplines (and writers [see 2.3, “Writing is a Way of Enacting Disciplinarity”]) are both enacted and encountered by writers—first as students, and then as professionals throughout their careers.

Identities are complex expressions and embodiments of who someone is (see 3.1, “Writing Is Linked to Identity”). For many students in college encountering disciplinary writing for the first time, discipline-specific writing threatens their sense of self because these ways of thinking and writing are so distinct from other more familiar reading and writing practices, such as those valued at home or in other communities in which the students are members (see 3.0, “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies,” and 3.5, “Writing Provides a Representation of Ideologies and Identities”). As writers continue to work in the academy and beyond, they negotiate (and challenge) disciplinary identities via writing, finding ways to traverse the differing implicit and explicit writing expectations. The process of learning to manage these tensions contributes to the formation of new identities, for as people progress through their major discipline(s), writing increasingly complex texts in the process, they are also writing themselves into the discipline(s) (see 2.3, “Writing Is a Way of Enacting Disciplinarity”). That process of identity formation is interwoven with learning the writing conventions, practices, habits, and approaches of their discipline.

For many people, the idea that writing is not merely a matter of recording one’s research or thoughts, but is in fact a process linked to the development of new, professional identities, is troublesome. Writing can appear to be an act of transcription or representation of processes, not an expression of identity. Many prevalent descriptions of the relationship between writing and research neutralize and generalize disciplinary or professional writing into a last step in the research project, one in which research results are “written up” (see 1.0, “Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity,” and 1.1, “Writing Is a Knowledge-Making Activity”). Approaching disciplinary writing as an act of identity and affiliation illuminates how writing in new contexts is not only about learning abstract conventions but also about learning how to *be* within a group with social conventions, norms, and expectations (see 3.0, “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies”).