

Breaking into Print

The Book Review Genre in an Introductory Graduate Seminar in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies

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Abstract

This assignment aims to help nascent scholars break into print and develop scholarly connections between their own areas of interest and the subfield of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies (RC&WS). Drawing on advice from Ballif et al. (2008), students in my graduate seminar write a publication quality book review of a recently published monograph in RC&WS. After a series of priming activities, students engage in a structured peer review that follows guidelines I developed as book review editor at *Composition Studies*.

As decades of scholarship on graduate assistant preparation makes clear, the introductory seminar in rhetoric, composition and writing studies (RC&WS) is often a contested space (Dobrin, 2005; Grouling, 2015; Pemberton, 1993; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Reid et al., 2012; Taylor & Holberg, 1999). Such seminars ensure that new teachers of college-level writing have sufficient knowledge of the histories and theories that inform the discipline, but many graduate students in English have never themselves taken introductory writing—let alone a course on writing theory—and some begrudge having to take coursework that is not strictly connected to their scholarly concentrations in literary studies, creative writing, or other subdisciplines in English. While disciplinary hierarchies vary by institution, RC&WS has historically occupied a marginalized space in many English departments, as the field is typically associated with general education instruction rather than with scholarship and creative activity (Dobrin, 2011). At my own institution, the University of Wyoming, for example, RC&WS is growing in popularity, but is still the smallest concentration in our graduate programs. When you acknowledge many students' lack of familiarity with RC&WS, it is no accident that some find the seminar uncomfortable territory. From my perspective, the scholarly book review assignment helps to ease at least some of these tensions, prompting students to make connections between their areas of concentration and RC&WS and to gain a better understanding of their own identity in the larger field of English.

In addition to helping students gain knowledge about disciplinary divisions and RC&WS, this assignment is also inspired by my desire to teach the rhetorical moves that get reviews published. Although this may feel too utilitarian a goal for some, it is one of the stated learning outcomes in our graduate program, and something I take seriously as a former book review editor for *Composition Studies*. Although the journal regularly publishes reviews by established scholars, one of its missions is likewise to take “an active role in mentoring advanced graduate students” (Micciche, 2018). Regarding the larger field, I also see the book review as an excellent genre for graduate courses because, as others have noted, the discipline benefits from the service novice scholars provide through writing book reviews (Ballif et al., 2008, p. 38). While not all disciplines may have these attitudes about graduate students publishing book reviews, my suspicion is that the assignment will translate to many fields, and perhaps particularly to those that value book production. And for those who may question the ethics of encouraging non-experts to review scholarly work, I leave concerns about the quality and content of graduate students' reviews up to the editors who may—or may not—publish their work.

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As I elaborate below, following Ballif et al. (2008) and Erwin (1996), the book review assignment requires students to make an argument about the book's success in accomplishing its aims; gives a summary of its contents; and identifies who will (and perhaps will not) benefit from reading the book. Given my experience as an editor, I likewise coach students that the strongest book reviews often also employ an evaluative thesis, outline the intellectual tradition the author is building upon, and provide readers constructive commentary on the book's strengths and limitations.

Course Overview and Assignment Priming Activities

In the English Department at the University of Wyoming, teaching assistants are required to take ENGL 5010: Rhetoric and Composition History, Theory, and Pedagogy during their first semester in the graduate program. While we also offer a one-hour weekly practicum on the nuts and bolts of lesson planning and responding to student writing, by contrast, ENGL 5010 focuses on the scholarly traditions that inform contemporary writing studies. I've been teaching the course for well over a decade, and over the years the seminar's core readings have included two or three disciplinary histories (Berlin, 2003; Goggin, 2010; Harris, 2012; Hawk, 2007; Miller, 1991; Ruiz, 2016); anthologized journal articles (Miller, 2009; Roen et al., 2002; Villanueva & Arola, 2011); and pedagogically focused guides (Bean, 2011; Inoue, 2015; Milner & Milner, 2007). So, while there is a decided focus on pedagogy in the course, unlike a traditional practicum that focuses on classroom routines, the seminar is scholarly at its core. In keeping, the book review assignment seeks to teach students scholarly conventions in English studies in general, and RC&WS in particular.

We begin talking about the book review early in the semester. Prior to drafting, students have read a few foundational articles in the field and finished one or sometimes two disciplinary histories. Before reading the historical monographs, however, I have them interrogate published reviews of these histories for several reasons: to pique their curiosity in the book, to provide a bit of a context for its aims, and to help students begin internalizing the book review genre's conventions. For example, if we're reading Berlin's *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (2003), I have them read reviews by Clifford (1997), Reber (1997), and Whitaker (1997); if we're reading Harris's *A Teaching Subject* (2012), they read reviews by Clark (2013), Cooper (2000), and Reynolds (1997).

Our discussion of the sample reviews is informal and non-directive. I ask students to predict what they will like about and struggle with in the book, and I prompt them to voice their general opinion of the reviews we've read. I then put students in small groups to produce a reverse outline of one of the reviews, which is simply the production of an outline of a piece that is already written. A common exercise featured in writing textbooks (Behrens & Rosen, 2011, p. 147; Murray, 2013, p. 125) the reverse outline asks students to describe the focus of each paragraph in the review, followed by a comment on how the paragraph functions to advance the writer's thesis. Each group is given a different review to reverse outline, and then the class as a whole contrasts how the outlines represent structures they might adopt or adapt in their review.

At this point, students are ready to choose a recently published book in RC&WS. I note that they should examine the venue where they hope to get published and pick a title that has not yet been reviewed in that journal. Then I point them to the field's prominent presses, and students usually find choosing their book easy, though occasionally they need assistance finding a book that is in conversation with their subfield. Because students tend to gravitate toward scholarship outside of RC&WS, they must submit their title for my approval, and I note that if they are serious about getting the review published, the book should be no more than four years old. Occasionally a student will request to review a classic in the field that is far older,

something that piques their interest or speaks very specifically to their subfield. If the title is in RC&WS, I agree to the request.

Before they begin drafting, we read the assignment prompt aloud (see below). This is useful in eliciting questions about the assignment and models how our program asks graduate assistants to introduce assignments in the introductory writing classes they teach. In fact, the prompt follows a similar structure as the assignments that graduate assistants use in their first-year writing courses: it includes a description of content requirements, an overview of audience expectations, and guidelines for structure and formatting.

During the same class period, I also have students read a book review of my own (Kinney, 2009), which evaluates *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, a professional primer that aims to coach future and current faculty through various watersheds in their careers, including how to write a book review (Ballif et al., 2008). As a form of direct instruction, I point out that my review deliberately follows the authors' advice: it summarizes the book's major sections and evaluates its effectiveness, in addition to outlining the intellectual tradition the book situates itself within. I also point out how my review gently critiques the book without lambasting it. Because offering constructive criticism is an area that students struggle with, I caution them that they should be evenhanded with any criticism they wage, perhaps even acknowledging alongside their criticism their position as a graduate student just entering the discipline. As the authors warn, "Any time you write a book review, but especially at this particularly vulnerable time in your career building, you will want to demonstrate a certain level of collegiality and respect for the work of your future peers and colleagues" (p. 38).

The following week, students bring in a complete draft to class, and I place them in groups to engage in structured peer review based on common forms of feedback I gave as a book review editor. During class time, students read each other's reviews, answer the questions from the peer review prompt (see below), and talk through their responses. We end with a full class discussion where students ask clarifying questions and I share editorial anecdotes, and I often point to additional published reviews that might serve as models for how to revise their drafts.¹

Given the tips we've shared, students then revise a final draft for a grade. Typically, their final products are strong, though there are common struggles they face, and I address these in the peer review section of the assignment prompt. Developing an evaluative thesis is a challenge for some, which is predictable given their novice status in the field. Similarly, many struggle with developing the intellectual tradition section of the review: again, the course is often their first introduction to writing studies and most don't have a command of the field's foundations.

Regarding general challenges in framing criticism, which I address in more detail below, many have problems mustering any criticism at all, while others have the opposite problem—they pan the book, for instance, because they find it "uninteresting." I generally read this as code for "non-literary" or "lacking a creative aesthetic," two common criticisms waged by students in literary studies and creative writing. Given their traditional humanistic training, another misstep I see repeated in graduate students' criticism of scholarship in RC&WS is that the book's findings are not statistically significant, which I attribute to their lack of familiarity with the range of social scientific methodologies. Just as a political scientist trained primarily in quantitative methods may not be conversant with a range of qualitative methodologies, humanists primarily trained in close reading aren't largely familiar with the mixed methods research employed in RC&WS.

Finally, another challenge students face is staying within word count expectations, and this is particularly the case if they choose to review an edited collection with multiple contributors. Normally my advice is that less is more, and that whether they are reviewing a monograph or a collection, it is better to focus the review on book sections rather than comprehensively address

every chapter, pointing instead to specific chapters that illustrate representative strengths or limitations of the book as a whole. Although I restrict my students to reviewing traditional scholarly monographs, I can imagine that students who review multimedia scholarship might face similar challenges.

More often than not, because of the thorough peer review they have already engaged in, rather than having to offer feedback on predictable flaws, I am able to focus my comments on ways to strengthen already strong reviews should students submit them for publication. To illustrate their success, below I showcase ways that several students overcame common missteps in their published book reviews.

Responses to the Assignment: The Rhetorical Moves that Successful Book Reviews Make

One of the real pleasures of teaching this assignment is that students who take it seriously have a very good chance of getting their work published. Their success also illustrates the ways that the assignment motivates students in concentrations outside of writing studies to genuinely engage in the field: with any luck, the assignment helps them to see RC&WS not as something distinct from their graduate work, but as a line of inquiry integral to their identity as scholars in the field of English studies, broadly conceived.

Designing an Evaluative Thesis

An MFA candidate in creative writing when she wrote her review, former student Annie Osburn typifies how to write a well-designed and explicitly evaluative thesis. Osburn (2017) begins her piece by framing the research questions that drive her interest in the book, and then develops a thesis that clearly names the reasons the collection is successful:

How can we create a public space for exploring tensions between communities and discourses in lockdown? How can we create ethical prison writing programs that foremost benefit writers? For me as a reader, Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford's edited collection *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out* is successful because it develops a flexible framework educators can use to answer these tough questions. (p. 264)

For me, this thesis is strong because it establishes a clear argument for why the book is worth reading. In a move reminiscent of advice offered by Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2008, p. 116), Osburn then uses succeeding paragraphs to name reasons to support this claim. I also appreciate how in her review as a whole, rather than trying to project what a reader in RC&WS would gain from the book, Osburn allows her interest in creative writing to frame her review.

Former doctoral student Rick Fisher likewise uses his scholarly interests to establish why the book that he reviews—Eodice, Geller, and Learner's *The Meaningful Writing Project* (2016)—is successful. As Fisher (2017) argues:

I am drawn to the book's claim that meaningful writing is often related to an instructor's balance between choice and restriction, to its brief comparison of the author's results to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and to the fascinating, small set of student participants who completed the survey primarily to say that they had never completed a meaningful writing project. As I think about how to engage colleagues across the curriculum in discussions about the kinds of writing projects they assign, these moments in the text seem likely to promote rich discussion. (p. 246)

One of the things I like most about this thesis is that it highlights what less experienced readers may see as a weakness—that is, the “brief comparison” of the NSSE and student data sets—and instead points to this as one of the book’s qualitative strengths. Such methodological subtlety is often hard for less experienced students to see, but as an advanced doctoral candidate in RC&WS when he wrote the review, Fisher had the disciplinary knowledge to make the argument.

Framing the Intellectual Tradition

Beyond the evaluative thesis, my editorial preference is also for reviewers to spend at least some time unpacking the book’s intellectual tradition. This is crucial, it seems to me, in helping the reader establish whether the book (let alone the review) is worth their time to read. But as I’ve already noted, being able to place a book in an intellectual tradition is a challenge for novice graduate students. With this in mind, I note to students that there are at least three ways to frame a book’s intellectual tradition: 1) mine its preface and introduction; 2) use the scholarship we have read in our class; and 3) draw on their own knowledge of the area under study.

The first of these moves is usually the most effective, and it is something that one of my master’s students specializing in RC&WS, Kailyn Washakie, employs well. In her review of Borgman and McArdle’s *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic* (2019), Washakie (2021) notes how the authors draw on a range of scholarship on online instruction, including the CCCC position statement on “Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction” (2013), and scholarship by Hewett et al. (2015) and Ruefman and Scheg (2016). All of these titles, predictably enough, are featured in the book’s introduction. As I coach students, the intellectual tradition section does not have to be exhaustive, but it is necessary to situate the book’s disciplinary contributions.

Former students Justin Neven and Brianna Casey help to illustrate moves two and three. Neven (2015), who was a doctoral student in literature when he wrote his review, cites two historical texts that we read in our seminar—Berlin (2003) and Hawk (2007)—to help him frame the scholarly contributions that Kroll makes in *The Open Hand* (2013). By contrast, former MA student in literature Casey (2018) draws on her knowledge of GLBTQ history to frame her review of Dunn’s *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (2016).

Offering Constructive Criticism

A final move I’ll highlight in my students’ published work is the way they frame criticism of the books they interrogate. For me as an editor, a good review offers at least some critique, even if it is only to point out the book’s limitations in scope. Here I turn to former MA students Raquel Corona and Nolan Goetzinger. Corona, who recently finished her doctorate in RC&WS at St. John’s University, doesn’t so much critique the book she reviews—Inoue’s *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* (2015)—as describe how classmates reacted to it. As Corona (2016) notes, “I have to attest to the concerns some of my classmates had with Inoue’s pedagogy. Perhaps predictably, the racial makeup of our seminar was overwhelmingly white, including high school teachers and college instructors of literature and composition” (p. 218). Here Corona hints at some readers’ criticism yet makes clear that she does not hold the same attitudes. In a slightly different vein, now in the doctoral program in literature at UC Riverside, Goetzinger (2017) notes what he had hoped to find but didn’t in *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story* (King et al., 2015): “I would have liked to have seen more chapters that were specifically applicable to first-year writing,” however, as he emphasizes, “such a critique would miss the democratizing impulse of the authors because the essays provide new, socially aware, and responsible questions” for classrooms beyond first-year writing (p. 214).

While not all students are as successful at designing evaluative theses, unpacking a book’s

intellectual tradition, or tactfully framing their criticism, the rhetorical acumen Osburn, Fisher, Washakie, Neven, Casey, Corona, and Goetzinger illustrates demonstrates how the book review assignment helps graduate students negotiate publication expectations and their burgeoning scholarly identity in English. To make a few more disciplinary comparisons: just as an economist with orthodox inclinations would stand to learn from reviewing scholarship that has more heterodox leanings²—or a microbiologist may benefit from interrogating macrobiological frameworks—graduate students in any discipline do well to climb out of their silos and juxtapose their disciplinary identities with disparate scholars in their field.

Limits, Successes, and Future Applications

Given the high caliber of the book reviews students turn in, I am always surprised that more don't submit for publication. I chalk this up to the busy workload of graduate student life, and perhaps also to the fact that some may wonder if a review of a book outside their area of concentration is worth their effort. When questioned along these lines by students, I typically make two arguments. First, while your area of concentration may not be RC&WS, virtually everyone in English will be called upon to teach writing-intensive courses; thus, future RC&WS colleagues will see your interest in the scholarship of their field as testament to your knowledge of and qualification to teach within it. Second, to rephrase a point already made, engaging a related subfield makes you better aware of your own intellectual identity: it helps you see both commonalities and differences among subfields' methodologies, conventions, and values.

One of the limits of the assignment may relate to the larger profession and the book author's reputation within it. As a reader of an earlier draft of this piece pointed out, while a book review publication is certainly beneficial to the graduate student reviewer, is it really of value to the book's author, particularly if the student is only passing through the discipline? More to the point, would a favorable graduate student review count the same for the book's author in a promotion case as one written by an experienced member of the field? Probably not. So, while fields like RC&WS may see graduate student publication mentoring as intrinsically valuable, faculty in other disciplines will want to consider such questions and gauge their answers according to the standards and ethics of their specific fields.

Another question also remains: to what degree would this assignment be valuable to disciplines in the sciences and professions—that is, disciplines that do not value the monograph in the same ways that the humanities and many social sciences do? I think the answer to this question must also be addressed on a discipline-specific basis, though I could certainly see how following some of the conventions outlined in the book review assignment could be applied to a similar assignment genre, namely the review article. For example, my assignment could be modified according to guidelines established by Crawford (2011), who offers tips on writing review articles for the hard sciences. In order to establish the guidelines for the assignment appropriate to a particular disciplinary community, I recommend locating scholarship in the field akin to Crawford's, as well as examining recently published genres similar to a review, and then performing the same reverse outlining activity my graduate students complete in ENGL 5010.

Disciplinary limitations acknowledged, it seems clear that the publishing success of my students is testament to the assignment's promise. Whether your field lies within the humanities, social sciences, sciences, or professions, if one of the missions of graduate education is to help students learn the rhetorical moves required for publication, then I argue it is vital that all fields—regardless of research division—embed publishable genres into their graduate courses.

As I have tried to gesture throughout this essay, getting to know the expanses and boundaries of a larger discipline requires students to critically examine the conventions of related

subdisciplines. This is certainly true of the subdisciplines within the eclectic field of English and—it seems to me—would likewise stand to reason in a range of disciplines. In my experiences teaching the book review assignment, students learn valuable lessons about disciplinary conventions and by extension their scholarly identities, not to mention their subdiscipline’s place in the larger field where it resides. I hope this essay helps readers across the disciplines think of productive ways to assign similar genres in their graduate programs.

ASSIGNMENT

Book Review in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies

Assignment Overview

Write a ~1,500-word book review of a single title of interest to you in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. Although the title you examine must be published in this explicit discipline, I encourage you to find a book that speaks to your graduate concentration or potential future professional interests. Generally, publishable reviews examine a monograph published in the last four years.

Writing a review of a recent book in writing studies aids you in learning the scholarly conventions required of publication as well as learning more about an important subfield in English Studies: you will have an opportunity to send your review out for publication, and through the process, learn more about the field and research within it.

To find a title, take a look at the websites of some influential scholarly presses in the field:

- [CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric](#)
- [Parlor Press, Writing Program Administration Series](#)
- [Southern Illinois University Press, Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms and Series](#)
- [Utah State University Press](#)
- [WAC Clearinghouse/Colorado State University Open Press](#) (free book downloads here)

Content

Regardless of where you hope to publish, it is important to remember that the purpose of a book review is to summarize the book’s contents and educate readers on whether the book is worth their time and suits their research interests. Identify the author’s purposes for writing and then develop a thesis that evaluates whether the book was successful fulfilling these aims.

Audience

You should be writing for scholars who are somewhat familiar with the field, but who have most likely not read the book. I also encourage you to write the review with a specific publication in mind. Academic journals such as *Composition Forum*, *Composition Studies*, *Enculturation*, and *Present Tense* are excellent venues for newcomers. Take a close look at the guidelines for the journal you will target and follow them carefully.

Structure and Formatting

To help you understand a review’s conventional structure, take a look at a few published reviews in your target journal. While different journals will have a range of conventions, in general your review should have an **evaluative thesis**, give context about the book’s **intellectual tradition**, develop a **general summary** of its major sections, and offer an **examination of its strengths and limitations**. Note: constructive criticism is a staple of most book reviews, but it is commonly

considered poor form to harshly pan a book, particularly if you are new to the field. Don't let the constructive criticism you offer overshadow your explication of the book's value to English Studies.

Book Review Peer Review: Common Feedback from a Book Review Editor

I've developed the guidelines for peer review below from my experience as the Book Review Editor for *Composition Studies*. The questions I list identify common missteps book reviewers make.

Does the review have an evaluative thesis?

Identify the thesis, focusing on the degree it is functioning as an evaluation of the book as a whole. What feedback, if any, do you have to make the thesis evaluative?

Does the review devote a section to the book's intellectual tradition?

Identify the paragraph(s) where the reviewer describes the intellectual tradition. (If the review doesn't, note a place where the writer might include it.) Is the intellectual tradition written so that readers will be able to identify the intervention the book makes?

Does the review suggest constructive criticism or limitations of scope?

While it's unwise to slam a book, most reviews offer at least some discussion of constructive criticism or limitations of scope. Identify the place(s) in the review where you find this kind of commentary, or suggest an appropriate spot to place it. If you have advice (how to tone down harshness or add criticism if it is thin or missing), please note as much.

Does the review accurately gauge the needs of its audience?

One common mistake reviewers make is they don't take into account that readers haven't read the book. As you read the draft, make notes of when the reviewer may be taking liberties about readers' prior knowledge.

Does the review follow a conventional structure?

A review that focuses on a book versus one that focuses on an edited collection will look somewhat different, but in either case, it is the job of the reviewer to give a summary of the book's major sections, pointing to aspects that serve as evidence for the book's successes or limitations.

Looking at the review as a whole, are there ways that it could be more engaging?

The best reviews attempt to teach the reader something about the field beyond what is in the book itself. Identify places where the review is doing this or note ideas for how the review might do so. If you have advice on how to make the review more engaging, note it here.

Now that you've read your peer's review, what questions do you have about your draft?

If you did something differently than your peer, make a note to address during class discussion.

Notes

¹When I teach the assignment again, I can imagine adding additional priming activities. For starters, because I gain so much from reading the reviews, I might ask students to report what they learned from the book to the rest of the class. I can likewise imagine having students read this article in preparation for the assignment.

²I thank my friend and former colleague at SUNY Binghamton, economics professor Andreas D. Pape, for helping me call on the distinction between orthodox and heterodox economics.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i2.112>.

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