

# “You’ve Been Disciplined”: Graduate Academic Writing as Social Practice

Amy E. Robillard\*

February 20, 2018<sup>†</sup>

*Abstract:* This essay describes a doctoral-level rhetoric and composition writing assignment that aims to help students transition from their identities as students to their identities as scholars. With an emphasis on academic writing as social practice, the assignment asks graduate students to analyze the intellectual moves scholars make in the context of a specific and detailed conversation in any subfield of English Studies. The essay shares the responses of two graduate students, one specializing in children’s literature and one in literary and cultural studies, and argues that the process of joining any disciplinary conversation is complex and deserves explicit instruction.

---

I remember clearly the day one of my graduate professors told me that my writing had changed. It was my third year in the doctoral program at Syracuse, and I had been revising a paper that would ultimately become a dissertation chapter and the beginnings of my article, “*Young Scholars Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Writing Practices*.” She held the paper out to me, and as I took it from her, she said, “You’ve been disciplined.” Three words. At the time, I did not entirely understand what she meant, though she probably went on to tell me that, with this work, I had demonstrated my knowledge of the field and my ability to situate an argument in the work of others. But I don’t remember that. All I remember are those three words. You’ve been disciplined. I knew enough to take it as the compliment she meant it to be.

When I teach the doctoral seminar in rhetoric and composition at Illinois State, I often tell this story in the context of talking with students about the challenges of transitioning from writing as a student to writing as a scholar. The assignment I describe in this article was motivated by a desire to help doctoral students in all subfields of English Studies understand academic writing as a social practice, as an ongoing conversation

---

\*Department of English, Illinois State University. aerobil@ilstu.edu. Copyright 2018 Amy Robillard. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

<sup>†</sup>Submitted, 1/13/2017; Accepted, 5/26/2017.

with many players and many parts, and as composed of a series of intellectual moves that they would need to be able to identify and imitate. Susanne Hall and Jonathan Dueck (2017) note in their Introduction to the first issue of *Prompt* that “Developing a writing assignment also requires that we marshal our disciplinary research and knowledge as well as our pedagogical study and experiences. In addition to introducing students to an area of inquiry, we introduce them to our discipline’s ways of asking and answering questions about that topic.” This work of introducing students to our “discipline’s ways of asking and answering questions” is even more explicit at the graduate level than at the undergraduate level, for it is there that we are consciously working to help students mediate between their identities as students and their burgeoning identities as scholars. With this assignment, the essential questions I wanted graduate students to consider were: how do we write, for whom, and why? More specifically, the assignment asked students to “analyze a disciplinary conversation in your subfield of English Studies” in the context of “the complex relationships between reading and writing and what it means to identify as a writer.” Students were required to “read four or five articles on an issue that is of current concern in children’s literature or creative writing or linguistics or literary and cultural studies and examine the ways scholars use texts.” They had been prepared to do this work by a seminar that, had I given it a title, would have been a riff on Joseph Harris’s riff on J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. I would have called it *How and Why We Do Things with Texts*.

### **The Seminar in Rhetoric and Composition Studies, Fall 2016**

Unlike many freestanding graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, the program at Illinois State offers a Ph.D. not in rhetoric and composition per se, but in English Studies. This means that the program emphasizes the linkages, overlaps, and interconnections among the subfields of English Studies that we name as children’s literature, composition studies, creative writing, linguistics, TESOL, literary and cultural studies, technical communication, and English Education. The Seminar in Rhetoric and Composition Studies is one of four seminars that each doctoral student is required to take, and it is therefore made up of students specializing in all of the subfields of English Studies. The professor cannot presume any discipline-specific background knowledge on the part of the students. Thus, while the assignment I describe in this essay may strike rhetoric and composition experts as not particularly innovative, the important thing to remember is that the doctoral students in this seminar were not students of rhetoric and composition. They were asked to shift their attention from learning the content of their specialties to learning how understanding content is dependent upon understanding that academic writing is social practice.

The syllabus description I wrote for the seminar in Fall 2016 emphasized what we do with writing and what writing does with us. Here is part of what I wrote:

We will spend time together talking about what it means to write as an academic, as a scholar, and as a human being. What does writing do for

us? What do we do for and with writing? While some of you may not see yourselves as specialists in rhetoric and composition, all of you—every single one of you—will spend a substantial portion of your lives writing, and it is a good idea for you to develop a good relationship with writing, to understand the moves you'll be expected to make as a scholar, and to understand what it means to enter a conversation.

Each of the readings I assigned did double duty: each provided content knowledge about the field of composition studies, and its author either modeled or commented explicitly on the intellectual moves they were making as an academic writer. I will present several of these texts here, though discussing them all is beyond the scope of this project. For instance, David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" (1986) provided a crucial analysis of and argument for the importance of student writing as the center of scholarship in the field at the same time that it offered us a language for discussing what it means to enter into and push against an authoritative discourse, to reject commonplaces, and to use the work of others to build a new idea. Another assigned reading, Richard Miller's "The Nervous System" (1996) introduced students to the academic/personal writing divide in the field at the same time that he resisted its terms by working consciously to "explore the extent to which it is possible to escape the confines of this debate" (p. 267).

Another of the many texts for the course, Joseph Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (2006), with its emphasis on "academic writing as a social practice, as a set of strategies that intellectuals put to use in working with texts" (p. 3), proved especially valuable for students identifying what it means to enter into and engage in intellectual conversations. Together with two other texts, Harris's work positioned students to both make and analyze these intellectual moves confidently. The first is Ken Hyland's *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing* (2000). I assigned the first two chapters of this book, in which Hyland (2000) describes published academic texts as "the lifeblood of the academy as it is through the public discourses of their members that disciplines authenticate knowledge, establish their hierarchies and reward systems, and maintain their cultural authority" (p. 1). Hyland (2000) notes, as many other scholars of writing do, that all disciplines are indebted to writing for the creation of knowledge, but, importantly, he also demonstrates via careful analysis that:

While disciplines are defined by their writing, it is *how* they write rather than simply *what* they write that makes the crucial difference between them. . . . Among the things we see are different appeals to background knowledge, different means of establishing truth, and different ways of engaging with readers. Scholarly discourse is not uniform and monolithic, differentiated merely by specialist topics and vocabularies. It is an outcome of a multitude of practices and strategies, where what counts as convincing argument and appropriate tone is carefully managed for a particular audience. (p. 3)

Hyland analyzes academic citation in academic papers in fields across the disciplines, and his emphasis on the rhetorical work of reporting verbs proved particularly significant

to students' projects. Reporting verbs are a form of what Hyland (2000) calls citation signals, and the importance of such verbs "lies in the fact that they allow the writer to convey clearly the kind of activity reported and to distinguish precisely an attitude to that information, signaling whether the claims are to be taken as accepted or not" (p. 23). When I describe David Bartholomae's work above as having "provided a crucial analysis," my reporting verb and its accompanying characterization of his analysis as "crucial" signal to the reader my positive attitude toward Bartholomae's work. Hyland (2000) notes that the citing author has three options for representing reported information:

as true (*acknowledge, point out, establish*); as false (*fail, overlook, exaggerate, ignore*); or non-factively, giving no clear signal. This last option allows the writer to ascribe a view to the source author, reporting him or her as positive (*advocate, argue, hold, see*), neutral (*address, cite, comment, look at*); tentative (*allude to, believe, hypothesize, suggest*); or critical (*attack, condemn, object, refute*). (p. 28)

Hyland (2000) analyzes a number of scholarly papers in the humanities and the hard sciences for their reporting verbs, and among his important findings (worth reading in full), for instance, is this: "In the soft fields, convincing readers that an argument is both novel and sound may often depend on the use of reporting structures not only to build a shared theoretical basis for one's arguments, but to establish a common perspective on the reliability of the claims one reports" (p. 37). Noticing the verbs we choose to report on the scholarly work of others matters. Interpreting those patterns can yield fascinating insights into how disciplines understand themselves.

Finally, another text that explicitly positioned students to think critically about scholarship as social practice is Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres's edited collection, *The Future of Scholarly Writing* (2015), which, they write in their Introduction, "represents a critical shift in the approach to scholarship and scholarly presentation by treating *how* we write with the same intellectual seriousness as *what* we write" (p. 2). The editors lament that the "question of how we write is often dismissed as beside the point, as if the only point worth attending to were content: the data we assemble, the information we provide, the analyses we offer, the theories we create" (2015, pp. 10–11). The assignment I describe here asked students to consider questions such as, "How do [scholars] respond to one another? How do they cite one another? What do their reporting verbs suggest about their affective stance toward the work they cite? To what extent, if any, does writerly identity figure into scholars' work? Do scholars in your field articulate in any way an awareness of the work accomplished by texts?" In her contribution to the collection, "The Work of Writing," Jane Gallop (2015) offers this insight: "Academic writing is like a foreign language; you have to learn it before you can express yourself in it. You have to learn a bunch of rules that are alien to you and unpleasant. . . . You start out imitating other people. Somewhere in that process, you become articulate" (p. 30).

Somewhere in that process, you become disciplined.

## Responses to the assignment

Without exception, the responses to this assignment were high-caliber. I will focus on two that offer particularly interesting insights, both about their subfield of English Studies and about what this assignment can offer new doctoral students entering a discipline.

The first, by Shelby Ragan, analyzes four articles discussing sexuality in young adult literature. Ragan's work is particularly interesting because the first article she analyzes is one that is not responding to but is rather initiating a conversation about an issue that nobody in the relatively young field of children's literature had until that point broached: Roberta Seelinger Trites's "All of a sudden I came": Sex and Power in Adolescent Novels" (2000). The focus of Ragan's analysis is scholars' objection and countering work—or the ways that scholars involved in a disciplinary conversation object to and counter one another's claims—and each of the three articles she analyzes respond in some way to Trites. I want to focus on Ragan's conclusion. She writes,

Even as each of these scholars takes a different focus within sexuality—power, body image, chick lit, or virginity—and exists at a different intersection of these various fields, there are some moves the authors all tend to make. Despite variances among other facets of the distribution of reporting verbs, the categories of author positive verbs and discourse act verbs occurred the most frequently for each author included in this analysis, which also made author positive discourse acts verbs the most frequently used. This pattern tells me that for scholars within this conversation, and potentially within other conversations involving young adult literature, the metaphor of "conversation" or "discussion" so often used is reified in the way they use the work of others, with many of the verbs involving verbal expression. Additionally, the work of others should speak for itself, mostly in definitive, assertive terms, and at a distance from the perspective of the scholar drawing on the source. This is supported by the distinct lack of counter-factive verbs (a mere four total between the four articles), which indicates a reluctance on the part of the writer to disagree with a source outright. Instead, moves such as "concede + counter," which identifies merit in an argument while still leaving room for "improvement," and identifying topics left unexplored within the conversation serve to create the space for new arguments. Deliberate disagreement or criticism, while sometimes present, rarely takes a direct approach, instead being leveled at groups or categories of people rather than individuals, which I see as a move to maintain positive, respectful engagements among the many voices in the various subdisciplines of the conversation. It is, as Hyland notes, "not important that everyone agrees but members should be able to engage with each other's ideas in agreed ways" (11). Not every disciplinary conversation is congenial, but for the most part scholars working in this conversation seem to attempt to respect the work of others in positive ways, which, as someone determined to enter this conversation, is comforting. (2016,

pp. 19–20)

Like the composition scholarship I assigned throughout the semester, Ragan’s work is doing double duty here, as rhetorical analysis and as an introduction to the tenor of work in her chosen subfield. She notes the ways that scholars in children’s literature engage in a very specific kind of conversation, one that is heavy on the positive reporting verbs and light on the antagonistic. This is not a field, in other words, in which scholars seem to attack one another ruthlessly. What is also clear from Ragan’s analysis is the extent to which Hyland’s (2000) work influenced her reading of the conversation in young adult literature; during the process, Ragan developed a number of charts and figures modeling Hyland’s charts in chapter 2 of *Disciplinary Discourses*, cataloging the affective content of reporting verbs used by scholars to cite other scholars. As much as composition and rhetoric scholars depend upon the metaphor of scholarly writing as a conversation, we have not paid very much attention to the affective content of reporting verbs. Ragan thus comes away from this assignment better acquainted both with the *what* and the *how* of the work in young adult literature.

The second example of student writing, by Cory Hudson, analyzes a specialized conversation in literary studies about the neuronovel that appeared in the journal *Modern Fiction Studies*. Hudson analyzes the entire special issue along with entries about the neuronovel written on a blog by Jonah Lehrer. To understand the excerpt I reproduce below, one needs to know that Marco Roth is known as the father of the neuronovel for having coined the term in 1997. At the end of his sixteen-page analysis, Hudson writes,

Though Roth birthed the genre of the neuronovel for the sole purpose of tearing it down, his peers in the English studies community didn’t champion his cause. It’s been an intriguing process analyzing how different scholars have taken up Roth’s essay and started working in the opposite direction. I’ve been able to watch a discussion evolve and transform. And it got me thinking: For Bakhtin, there are two important factors concerning language that need to be recognized: “first, there is no neutral point of view—‘all words,’ Bakhtin said, ‘have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, an age group, the day and hour,’” and second, “the ‘expression of an utterance’ is always a response, expressing ‘the speaker’s attitude toward others’ utterances”” (qtd. in Boddy 38). The novel in other words is dialogic. Within the novel there exists an interplay occurring between social dialects, class dialects, professional jargons, generational languages, regional colloquialisms, and period-specific slang begetting a representation of a particular moment. Language depicts a world. It’s a quality that I’ve always appreciated in literature, but I’ve never truly thought of scholarship as being dialogic as well, until this semester. (2016, pp. 14–15)

It would have been easy enough for Hudson to end the paper here. I would have been satisfied that he had done the analysis I had asked for, and I would have been impressed that he explicitly made the connection between the dialogism of the novel and the

dialogism of scholarship. But what I really appreciate about Hudson’s paper comes in the next two, final paragraphs.

I had an epiphany the other night when I was working on my final project for Dr. Breu’s theory course. My thesis was that Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive thought bore many similarities to the incompleteness theorems developed by the German mathematician Kurt Gödel. I was going to demonstrate this through a hybrid Derridean/Gödelean reading of a novel by Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations*. It turned into a train wreck, just blew up in my face. In the drafting of the paper for Dr. Breu, I tried to draw the connections between Derrida’s philosophical thinking and Gödel’s thought process on my own, solo. I had sources that explained how Derrida applies to *The Gold Bug Variations*, and I also had some that connected the novel to Douglas R. Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. But the paper devolved into a “Hey, look at all the fun brainy connections that I made.” I couldn’t do anything with those connections. I stalled out. I worked myself so far away from discussions about English studies, focusing on mathematics and philosophy, that my reading of Powers’ novel didn’t provide anything of value for my own discipline. I couldn’t make any claims or connect my work to a larger discussion. All I was doing was reporting on something that I thought was interesting, and I omitted any reasons as to why others should find it just as interesting as well. I was working in isolation from the scholars and critics that I’m supposed to be working alongside.

Feeling like a failure, I curled up with a book that I’d gotten in the mail earlier that day, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*. Lucas Thompson wrote the book, and it has an introduction by [Stephen] Burn. In the introduction, Burn describes the “generative axioms” of Wallace studies, the must-read articles about Wallace. He talks about where Wallace studies began, where it’s gone, and where it’s headed. Burn synthesizes Thompson’s book into that discussion. Reading Burns’s introduction, for whatever reason, finally made it click: I’m part of a fucking discourse, so act like it! Up until this semester, sources have been something that I use to *prove my point*. As a young scholar, I haven’t been working *in* a discipline. I’ve been trying to profit from one. (2016, pp. 15–16)

What I appreciate about Hudson’s reflective work at the end of his analysis is that he demonstrates that he has learned that scholarship is dialogic—in this seminar. Then, doing work for another seminar, he seems to have forgotten that lesson. Until he remembers it, and it clicks for him in ways he had not been expecting. His learning about scholarly discourses becomes real for him in a way that no assignment could ever prompt. The assignment was just one part of a much larger discourse of English studies and one part of a complex life, the conditions of which clicked into place at just the right moment.

I'm tempted to end this brief article with the claim that Ragan and Hudson have been disciplined, like I was so many years ago. Maybe this is so. If this is on its way to being true, what I hope is also true is that both of these graduate students—along with their seven peers from the seminar—are far more aware of what it means to be disciplined than I was when I was still in coursework. Perhaps more importantly, this is just one assignment of many, one that asks students to think critically and reflexively about themselves as writers but also about authors they are reading as writers, too. It was also one assignment of many for them in a semester of other seminars and other professors asking them to think critically and reflexively about other equally important aspects of English Studies scholarship. Rather than claiming that Ragan, Hudson, and their classmates have been disciplined, I would like to claim instead that they have become better aware of what we do with scholarship and education and what it does with us. Because, this, too, is an ongoing conversation that so many of us forget we are involved in. I imagine students rarely do.

Perhaps this, then, is what I hope that I will remember after this assignment: like any other process, learning the conversations and conventions of a discipline is complicated, fraught, and never once-and-for-all. It is a process that proceeds with fits and starts, it is one that hurts, and it is one that we are more likely to forget that we are involved in the longer we have been doing it. It becomes second nature for us, but if we are to teach graduate students to write well as they enter disciplinary discourses, we need to remind ourselves how we got to where we are. Only then can we begin the critiques that are the lifeblood of a thriving academic discipline.

---

### **The assignment: Final project**

*See the Supplementary Files for this article at [thepromptjournal.com](http://thepromptjournal.com) for a PDF facsimile of the original formatting of this assignment.*

- 15-20 pages
- 15-minute presentation

We've spent a great deal of time this semester discussing the ways scholars use writing, the ways we use writing in response to the work of others, the ways we anticipate our writing being used by others. We've read and talked about what it means to enter into multiple and competing discourses, what happens when we misrecognize a discourse, and how the multiple discourses of the field of composition studies have shifted over the years since its formation. We've talked about the complex relationships between reading and writing and what it means to identify as a writer.

For this assignment, I'd like you to analyze a disciplinary conversation in your subfield of English Studies from this perspective. Read four or five articles on an issue that is of current concern in children's literature or creative writing or linguistics or literary and

cultural studies and examine the ways scholars use texts. How do they respond to one another? How do they cite one another? What do their reporting verbs suggest about their affective stance toward the work they cite? To what extent, if any, does writerly identity figure into scholars' work? Do scholars in your field articulate in any way an awareness of the work accomplished by texts?

You may draw on any of the work we've read together this semester as you do this work.

During the last two weeks of class, you will present a 15-minute version of your analysis. I expect this presentation to be as polished as it would be for a professional conference. You do not have to read a paper aloud, but I do want you to be prepared to present your work professionally.

---

## References

- Bammer, A., & Joeres, R.-E. B. (Eds.). (2015). *The future of scholarly writing: Critical interventions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bartholomae, D. (1986). Inventing the university. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 5(1), 4–23.
- Gallop, J. (2015). The work of writing. In A. Bammer & R.-E. B. Joeres (Eds.), *The future of scholarly writing: Critical interventions* (pp. 29–39). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall, S., & Dueck, J. (2017). Editors' Introduction: Presenting Writing Assignments as Intellectual Work and as Disciplinary Practice. *Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments*, 1(1), 1–7. Retrieved from <http://thepromptjournal.com/index.php/prompt/article/view/9>
- Harris, J. (2006). *Rewriting: How to do things with texts*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip068/2006004631.html>
- Hudson, C. (2016). *Let's talk neuronovel*. Unpublished Paper, Normal, IL: Illinois State University.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. New York: Longman.
- Miller, R. E. (1996). The nervous system. *College English*, 58(3), 265–286.
- Ragan, S. (2016). *Cross-inter-multidisciplinary conversations: An investigation of the methods of social interaction in the study of sexuality in young adult literature*. Unpublished Paper, Normal, IL: Illinois State University.
- Trites, R. S. (2000). *Disturbing the universe: Power and repression in adolescent literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.