



## Explicitly Teach the Genres of Your Discipline

### **Do Not Assume Students Can Already Write in the Genres of Your Discipline!**

When I was a College senior and preparing my application for a graduate program, I learned that I needed to submit a “Letter of Intent.” I had never heard of a letter of intent before, but I was an English major, and I certainly knew how to write a letter. So, I did – I added the date, inside address, salutation to “Whom It May Concern,” body paragraphs, and signed my name with a flourish! It was not until months later that I learned that a “Letter of Intent” should not take a letter format! It should be a well-developed persuasive essay on my plans for graduate school and career with evidence that I was well-suited for graduate school!!

Why didn’t I ask for clarification? **I did not know that I did not know!** Our students may think they understand what we want when we assign public policy statements, ethnographies, literature reviews, or historiographies, but it is not their job to “guess” what we are looking for.

**Teach students explicitly how to write the genres of your discipline. Explain why we use those genres, for whom, and for what occasions.**

For example, in psychology, some published articles are “Literature Reviews.” If we do not teach students, they may assume that a literature review is a list of sources on a given topic; a more scholarly version of the list might be an annotated Reference list. Other students may think that a literature review is a survey of possible literature with an attached report on which sources may be more valuable. However, a psychology literature review may be an argumentative essay with a strong stand and the creation of new solutions to a problem.

Teach your students that your writing assignment is not merely a “report” on a topic, or simply your personal whim, or even a mechanism of ancient punishment, but that the genre is one more way of deepening their entrance into the discourse of your discipline. Others in the discipline may be interested in their results.

### **Why Should I Be Explicit in Teaching Genres I Use for My Writing Assignments?**

- “Explicit teaching” is crucial for “undergraduates, who are just at the thresholds of their disciplines. Most undergraduate writers lack contextualized knowledge of the disciplines to which they are being introduced” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 64).
- The “acquisition of disciplinary style typically takes place gradually throughout the period of undergraduate and graduate study. Explicit teaching of writing by faculty within the disciplines can further ease the task undergraduates face as they move toward mastery” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 64).

- Students should “assimilate new genres (ideally with the help of explicit instruction from faculty in the disciplines)” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 66).
- “Mastery of a discipline’s writing style helps students acquire the discipline’s style of thinking and problem solving” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 75).
- Students may be more engaged “when they know why they are doing what they’re doing and how it will benefit them” (Darby & Lang, 2019, p. 22).
- Be explicit as you teach genres – students may try to use a “template” such as the five-paragraph essay where they can simply dump in the content without any critical thinking, synthesis, or analysis.
- When teaching genres, do not simply give students a set of instructions to create one – add a “story” that will help students put together the bits and pieces (e.g., APA style is a culture rather than simply a list of picky rules; literature reviews or public policy statements or historiographies provide information in a consistent way so that readers can anticipate what to expect and how to apply what they read, etc.)

### What Do I Need to Teach?

- There are systematic differences between disciplines: “Disciplinary styles are not just frames or shells into which content can be cast, but habits of thought and communication grounded in the objectives, values, and ‘world view’ of each discipline” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 65). Help students understand your discipline and why the five-paragraph essay will not convey the information the readers are seeking.
- What introduction do students need into the disciplines: “mastering the reasoning, the conventions, and the epistemological assumptions” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 65).
- “All academic discourse requires attention to the work of other scholars; the way references to other writers and texts are managed is governed by disciplinary conventions. These patterns encode differences in the ways disciplines conceive the nature and purpose of intertextual dialogue” and encapsulate the “importance of shared, replicated methodology” (Linton et al., 1994, p. 68).

### When Am I Going to Have Time to Create Explanations for the Genre?

Although it is important that faculty explicitly teach the genres of their discipline and use them as writing assignments, the FHSS Writing Lab can help!

Consider using a handout or PowerPoint or example to help students understand and remember what you are teaching them about the genre.

The FHSS Writing Lab tutors have created some “generic” descriptions of a variety of genres that faculty currently use in their courses. You are welcome to use them, adapt them, or simply get some ideas from them. We are also happy to create additional aids at your request!

#### References:

Linton, P., Madigan, R., & Johnson, S. (1994). Introducing students to disciplinary genres. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, 1(2), pp. 63-78.

Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes*. Jossey-Bass.

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