Genre analysis

The writing style and rhetorical conventions of your discipline.

Writing across the disciplines

Many students may have difficulty because they are in a new field of study at the college level, and have had no training or help in academic writing in the field. The conventions, or standards, of research and writing in the field, are foreign to them, as well as the reasons for such standards. This inductive assignment has each student engage in discovery learning, by bringing 1-2 academic, scholarly papers from his/her field, and learning by comparing their papers with papers from other fields in a group discussion. Then they can give a discussion or write a paper on how to write papers in the field. The following can be given to them as a worksheet.

Worksheet

Goal: To become aware of a chosen genre in your field – its structure, style, grammar, and organization.

Materials: One paper from your field of study (for now; later you should find a second paper)

Title and source of article:

1. List the sections that your article is divided into (e.g., abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, bibliography, appendices).

2. Is there an explicit thesis statement or an implied thesis? What is it? Where is it located?

3. Are the research sources or cited sources primary (the writer's own experimental, analytical, or observation data) and/or secondary (other sources)? Is the content mostly fact or opinion?
   • Is the content mostly factual, or in some way persuasive, e.g., by an author presenting his/her viewpoint, interpretation, analysis, or opinion?
4. How does the author show a clear connection between ideas? That is, what cohesive and structuring devices are used?

- transitionals (connectives, conjunctions)
- Are topics of discussion referred to by means of repetition of key words; by using synonyms for concepts or terms that are regularly referred to; or with pronouns or other referring forms (such, so, this, that, there, etc.)
- introducing new topics: e.g., done by transitional expressions, or just plainly introducing it in a new paragraph?
- reintroducing previously mentioned items (e.g., as for, speaking of...)
- paraphrasing or summarizing ideas

5. How does the writer use titles, subtitles, headings to organize the development of ideas? Are charts, tables, and graphs used, and in which parts of the paper? Are footnotes and/or endnotes used? If so, what format do they follow, and for what purpose does the writer use them?

6. How are sources cited within the paper, and in the bibliography? What is the format, and what kinds of information appear in the citations? E.g., what information do the in-text citations provide? In the end references section, in what order do items appear in the citations (author, year, titles, etc.)? To what kind of information does this order give prominence?

7. **Paragraph styles.** What common paragraph styles occur? For example, are they comparison, contrast, analytical, narrative, descriptive, definition, classification, or listing/example ¶s? What kind of transitional words are common in these paragraphs? Why do you think these styles are common in this paper? Do you think these are typical in writing in your field?

8. **Language use.** Look at the language forms that are commonly used. Are some of the following forms noticeably more common? If so, where?

- Is this section written mostly in active or passive voice?
- Which tenses are most frequently used – past, present, or future? Simple or progressive tenses?
- Are any particular verb types frequently used, such as modal verbs (can, could, shall, should, would, must, may...)?
- Which pronouns are most frequently used, and why?
- sentence structures, e.g., active or passive sentences, inverted sentences

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1 Inverted sentences are those with an adverbial, prepositional, or adjectival phrase moved to the beginning of the sentence, with the subject following the verb; e.g., “Into the room sauntered a penguin.”
9. **Types of rhetorical support**

Also consider the kind of supporting evidence and arguments that are used as arguments for claims made or ideas proposed by scholars in the field, particularly in academic papers. First, which kind of overall purpose and tone does the article exhibit?

- informative or descriptive
- argumentative or persuasive
- creative, subjective, personal

Academic writing is generally both informative, but also argumentative; this is true for most fields. A researcher publishes not only new information and ideas, but also attempts to persuade readers about some point, such as:

- This theory or idea is correct, or is better than other proposals
- The data support or prove a particular hypothesis
- Theory X can be applied to a new domain or to solving a problem
- This experiment is interesting and worthwhile / These data are worthwhile

More specifically, the kinds of support or evidence for the arguments or ideas presented in the paragraphs and in the whole article may be one of these – which kind(s) of support are used in the article?

- statistical or numerical data
- experimental data
- observational data
- comparison data (e.g., conclusions from statistical comparison of two groups)
- ethnographic data\(^2\) – based on observation of qualitative data like human social interactions
- examples
- anecdotes
- historical evidence
- historical narrative, or background
- quotations
- the authority of other scholars
- legal (forensic) argumentation
- theoretical analysis or discussion
- syllogism (e.g., in philosophy) or other logical argumentation
- mathematical proofs or arguments
- logical inferences
- analogy, metaphor
- more subjective inferences, arguments, impressions, etc.
- summary
- others?

Papers that make heavy use of statistical data, experimental data, or statistical analysis of comparative data are typically what we call quantitative research – following strict scientific criteria. Such research is common in science, engineering, and social science fields. Other papers may rely on observational data (including ethnographic data) and the researcher’s own interpretation of the data. This is qualitative research, which is common in humanities and social science fields. What kinds are prevalent in your field, particularly in its academic writing? Why would these be preferred?

\(^2\) ‘Ethno-’ means people, from Greek; here it can refer to observing and recording data (‘-graphic’) about individuals or several people, e.g., when an anthropologist observes people in their daily lives and social interactions.
Comparison

Get together with a classmate from a different major than yours (though preferably a somewhat related or similar major) and compare your results. How are they similar? How are they different? Reflect on the various organizational, grammatical, and discourse structures that you have found. Discuss why you think the writer uses these structures regularly, and how typical you think these are for your field. Also consider how and why your article may differ from your classmate’s article. What is it about your field that leads to the particular language forms, structures, writing genre, and rhetorical styles in your paper?

Have students discuss the above in groups, and then each write a short paper on the topic of “How to write an academic paper in [field X],” e.g., “How to write an academic paper in biochemistry.”

Academic worldviews

A more advanced exercise can be given to juniors, seniors or graduate students in their fields. For such students with some knowledge of their fields, it can be helpful to have them reflect more on the nature of their fields, how scholarly work is done in the field, and how one writes about it or presents it. After doing the above genre analysis worksheet, you can have students from different majors form groups and discuss the following:

• How would you explain your field to someone who does not know your field? With your classmates, try to explain what people do in the field, how they do research, and why they use such means to conduct research. Also try to explain why the field and the research are interesting – why should someone care about it? Why is it important, interesting, or helpful to society?

Then you can have them discuss some of the following questions, and then present and/or write a paper about them.

*Topic: How to write an academic paper in your field.*

You will write an essay explaining how academic or professional writing is done in your field of study. You might wish to write as if you were writing to younger students or future students in your field. The essay is to be based on the genre analysis assignment, but you will expand on it. Your paper should be at least 4 pages, plus references on a separate page. For the essay, examine at least three articles from your field. If your field seems broad, you may like to focus on a specific subfield or area within your field. You will need to address some of the following (discuss those aspects that are relevant, and in whatever sequence and form that seems appropriate).

• What kind and how much writing is expected of students in your field, and specifically in your department. If possible, also discuss the kind of writing that would expected in a career in the field, or when one enters graduate school.
• Describe the kinds of research topics and questions that are considered important in the field. What are basic terms, theories, and terms that one would need to know? Describe the academic worldview or paradigm, and how that affects the writing style and form.

• What kind of work constitutes research in your field, how is the research done, and why is it preferred in the field? How is it written up? How does the type of research affect the writing style and form?

• What background knowledge do writers assume that their readers already know?

• Explain the general purpose and tone of the writing, and the more common paragraph forms, and why they might be commonly used.

• Organization, arrangement, and types of sections used; do various academic articles consistently follow the same structure, or do they vary? How are introductions and conclusions done?

• Format, style, and grammatical conventions – e.g., verb tenses, sentence types, transitionalss, grammatical cohesion, etc.; why are some grammatical styles or features commonly used?

• Argumentation style; logical flow; for example, what kind of evidence or argumentation is used for support? How much does the argumentation depend on the writer's own analysis, his/her own original research data, or other cited information?

• How does one make the writing informative, persuasive, and relevant to others? How does one achieve good logical coherence and flow?

• How might academic writing in your field in English differ from such writing in Korean (or other languages)?

• Contrast and compare the writing in your field with writing in other related fields

Be sure to cite the articles from your field that you will be using as examples to illustrate important points (generally, at least two articles per group member). We have not discussed citation formats, so if you are not familiar with these, you may simply imitate the citation and bibliography style that you see in your articles.

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3 E.g., the theories, main issues of interest, one's motivation or goals, the general research orientations (theoretical, qualitative, quantitative), and the specific research methods (quantitative experiments, interviews, theoretical arguments, etc.).

4 E.g., analytical, process, descriptive, narrative, example, contrast / comparison ¶'s.