Writing in the Academic Tradition: Raising Student Awareness of the Textual Features of Formal Academic English

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Abstract:
Advanced level writers, while to varying degrees competent in their use of sentence structure and mechanics, may nonetheless struggle with tone, and in particular with distinguishing textual features that differentiate informal writing from more formal texts. Writing instructors must, therefore, make explicit for their students the lexical and stylistic features that mark a text as formal or informal and even go so far as to help students to identify features that typify genres, for example contrasting the conventions of essays written as literature within a literary genre with research written in an academic style. This paper attempts to make explicit several lexical and stylistic conventions that mark texts as formal or informal and suggests ways in which instructors might help their students identify these elements in their own writing and go about being more deliberate in their use of these features.

Essay writing is often taught, consciously or otherwise, using models written in the literary tradition. Since essays written in this tradition vary widely in tone and style, they often include rhetorical features that may be inappropriate for more formally written, academic essays, and in particular, research writing. While students may be able to transfer some of the skills they learn when writing in the literary genre such as thesis and support to other genres such as writing for academic purposes in business, history, or engineering classes, using literary essays as models may be confusing to students with regard to what stylistically is or is not appropriate in a more formal, academic paper, thus leaving students on their own to determine the more subtle aspects of tone, phrasing, and word choice when attempting to make their writing sound more formal and academically acceptable. This paper seeks then to clarify for advanced writing teachers in higher education some of the stylistic features that mark a text as academic, and more specifically, to help them help their students to formalize their prose and “to create writing that is, according to
John Swales’ seminal work in genre analysis (1990) as well as a variety of more recent, related works (Gillett, A. (n.d.); Swales & Feak, 2012; Tweddle 2009) contrast some of the tonal and textual features that differentiate writing for public as opposed to academic and professional audiences. They also give teachers strategies for helping their students at both the graduate and undergraduate level survey, identify, and utilize these rhetorical features in their own academic writing with the ultimate goal being to increase students’ academic competence within their own particular academic discourse communities.

To begin this process, students first need to be made aware of and then hold firmly in mind audience and purpose. The writer/speaker has a communicative purpose which can be classified as entertaining, informing, or persuading, none of which are mutually exclusive and in fact may, more often than not, overlap and be attributed primary and secondary roles. Similarly, a distinction between a public audience of non-experts as opposed to an academic or professional audience of experts needs to be established in the mind of the writer and the needs of each addressed if a text is to be rhetorically effective. Borrowing from an exercise in *A community of writers: A workshop course in writing* (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989), my upper level, college writing students are asked to begin to make these distinctions between audience and tone by contrasting two different titles for the same article written for these two different audiences in two different periodicals. The first, “Can a lucky charm get you through organic chemistry?” (p.205), originally published in *Psychology Today*, and the second, “Uncertainty and the use of magic” (p.209), originally published in *Current Anthropology*, dramatically illustrate this distinction. While the former title is a complete sentence and meant to appeal to a public audience using the rhetorical device of raising a question meant to pique the curiosity of the reader, the latter is a much briefer, more straightforward noun phrase geared towards an academic audience of experts.
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Drawing from the same sources, students are asked to look at two examples and to try to identify the rhetorical features that differentiate them. Again, the first example, intended for a public audience, is from “Can a lucky charm get you through organic chemistry?”:

Each time Mary Sue, a B+ student, prepares for an exam, she travels 12 miles to the library of another university and sits in the same carrel to study. She once got an exceptionally high mark on a physics test after studying in that library, and ever since, she has returned. (p.205)

And the next example, intended for an academic audience, is from “Uncertainty and the use of magic”:

Lewis (1963) found that the use of magic by American mothers with sick children depended on the mothers’ knowledge of medicine and not on the uncertainty or danger of a particular illness. (p.209)

Students quickly notice and point out that while the former is more interesting and entertaining in its use of an anecdotal example to illustrate a point, it would nonetheless be unacceptable as proof in a scientific paper. The academic corollary to this is the latter, which illustrates how citing a published study is a more acceptable form of evidentiary support. Continuing with the same exercise, students are asked to contrast this first quotation from “Can a lucky charm get you through organic chemistry?” in the Psychology Today article:

Not long ago, we decided to investigate the use of magic among supposedly sophisticated college students. (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989, p.205)

with this second quotation from “Uncertainty and the use of magic” in the Current Anthropology article:

This study examines these relationships using a sample of American and Irish college students. (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989, p.209)

Here again, students are quick to point out the differences between the first person, human agent in the first example and the third person, non-human agent in the second. The latter sounds more objective and focuses on the study itself while the former capitalizes on the rhetorical use of the pronoun “we” to include the audience in a narrative that comes across as being more personal. Another easily identifiable textual feature of more formal, academic texts is something Swales and Feak, in the “Language Focus” section of the first chapter of their textbook Academic
Swales and Feak note, “In lectures and other instances of everyday spoken English, the verb + preposition is often used; however, for written academic style, there is a tendency for academic writers to use a single verb [the latter of Latinate origins] when possible” (p.17). Swales and Feak include multiple examples and exercises devoted to helping students understand this difference. In one such exercise, students are provided with a list of choices and must substitute a more formal, one word verb for a phrasal verb (in bold) as in the example below:

Many software manufacturers in developed countries put up with (tolerate) widespread copyright violations in less developed countries and often even offer local versions of their products (p.18)

Here again, students are quick to identify the former as more common to spoken English and the latter the preferable choice in a more formal, written text. Subsequent exercises ask students to create and substitute their own alternatives.

In a related exercise, Swales and Feak (2012) look at the “vocabulary shift” as it pertains to nouns and other parts of speech, noting that “in academic texts, there is an abundance of rather long noun phrases, which tend to carry a lot of meaning in a rather compact form” (p.20). By way of illustration, they contrast the following two sentences:

English has emerged as the international language of scientific communication. This phenomenon has been widely documented.

The emergence of English as the international language of scientific communication has been widely documented. (p.20)

While one could argue that both are academically acceptable, the latter illustrates the aforementioned tendency to employ nominalization—transforming verbs, adjectives, and other forms of speech into nouns as a way of sublimating agency such that the focus, much like when using the passive, is on what is taking place rather than on who is performing the action—as a feature of academic texts. Contrasting the following serves as a further illustration of the difference:

Workers enlarged the doors to make it easier to load and unload. (Enlarging the doors facilitated loading and unloading).
It is important to determine what is causing the problem. (Determining what is causing the problem is important).

As can be seen in the examples, the nominalized structures in parentheses, at least in part and as a result of either deleting agency or by moving the bulk of the information to the subject position of the sentence, would tend to be recognized as sounding more academic.

What follows next is a brief compendium of lexical and stylistic choices that mark texts as appropriate for public (informal) or academic / professional audiences (adapted from Swales & Feak, pp.22-25)
**Public**

Uses first and second person human agents (subject)

Uses contractions: (don’t)

Negative forms: not any, not much, not many

Vague expressions: etc., and so forth, a bunch of stuff / things

May use direct questions as rhetorical device

May place adverbs at the beginning or end of sentences

Length is unimportant and texts may be wordy and even baroque in style;

May use slang or idioms; jargon, if used, must be defined

Uses devices to raise the interest level of the reader, e.g. humor, anecdotes or other devices

**Academic / professional**

Uses third person, non-human agents / passive voice

Avoids contractions: (do not)

Negative forms: little, few, no

More precise: ...and others of this type / class,

Avoids direct questions

Places adverbs midposition/ close to the verb.

Values precision and clarity over entertainment

Uses technical words / jargon; avoids slang and idioms

Values precision and clarity over entertainment
In conclusion, while the above may serve as general guidelines for formalizing texts, whenever possible, students should be encouraged to compare the “rules” they are taught to the kinds of writing done in their respective fields of study since variations are sure to occur, and these are on a continuum dependent on any number of factors including genre, audience, and purpose. Since rhetoric is more akin to art than science, no simple prescriptive formula can account for all of its multifarious forms, and instead instructors need to encourage students to begin to develop a sense of the variety of genres that exist and the rhetoric that underlies them. Once this kind of a seed has been planted, students can begin to recognize and account for variation both within and amongst genres to identify not only such concepts as tone and levels of formality, but also other rhetorical features such as organization and the kinds of content that are endemic to a genre.

Finally, I would recommend that instructors interested in helping students improve their rhetoric and develop and employ a higher degree of formality in their academic texts consider visiting a couple of websites which have been of great help to me and my upper-level writing students. These sites include but are not limited to interactive exercises on style and word choice like those discussed above. The first is authored by Andy Gillet, (n.d.), and entitled *Using English for academic purposes: a guide for students in higher education*; and the other is by Sheldon C. H. Smith (2013) and found on the EAP Foundation.com website. In addition, both sites include a host of resources for writing students including discussions of genre and heuristics geared towards helping students understand the kinds of expectations writing in an academic setting demand.
References


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