

Reviewer: Adam Simpson
Title: Genres across the Disciplines
Authors: Hilary Nesi & Sheena Gardner
Publisher: Cambridge University Press
ISBN: 9780521149594
Publication Date: 2012

Blurb

A groundbreaking title in the field of higher education writing, this book uncovers norms and conventions across the whole spectrum of tertiary education written work.

Review

Why do university students write? What are they expected to write? To what extent do academics understand the process of setting a writing assignment, and – significantly – how proficient are they in creating appropriate prompts to elicit the kind of writing they expect? On first reading, none of these questions seem that demanding, nor might you expect them to have interesting answers. Nevertheless, it is precisely with such issues that *Genres across the Disciplines* concerns itself.

Those aspiring to read this title should know that it is intended for a fairly select audience. If, say, you're currently doing an MA and at some point need to analyse student writing, this title will be at the top of your wish list. Indeed, it is with such an audience in mind, along with those tasked with preparing and assessing a writing-related curriculum and/or materials design, that this title has been written. As such, it presents the reader with what is ostensibly an unparalleled, forward-looking, corpus-based body of research into contemporary student writing in higher education.

Another thing the prospective reader needs to be aware of is that this title draws data exclusively from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus. Its findings, while still largely applicable to other world 'Englishes', are consequently mainly focused on the British context of academic writing. For those unfamiliar with corpus linguistics, a corpus is a large and structured set of texts that are used to conduct statistical analysis and hypothesis testing, checking occurrences of language items or validating linguistic rules as they appear in or influence a specific language context. The BAWE corpus contains 2761 pieces of proficient assessed student writing, ranging in length from about 500 words to about 5000 words. The texts are derived from Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences and Physical Sciences and are examples from four levels of study; from undergraduate through to Master's level. Thirty-five different disciplines of writing are represented. This means that the book is replete with authentic examples of assignment tasks, macrostructures, concordances and keywords.

Genres across the Disciplines is presented in two parts. Part one serves as an overview of academic writing, with two foci. The first area of focus is the role of student writing in contemporary university degree programmes (namely the focus on prior research, the importance of writing in an academic program, and the approaches to study). The second focus of this overview section is the families of genres of assessed writing (including many tables indicating the distribution of genre families and genres across both disciplines and years of study). Part two, the main body of the book, examines the social functions of university student writing; developing understanding and explaining (such as explanations and exercises); developing arguments and independent reasoning (such as critiques and essays); developing research skills (such as literature surveys, methodology recounts, research reports); and preparing for professional practice (such as case studies, problem questions, design specifications, proposals). Part two is also concerned with university student writing in terms of personal development. Dealt with in detail are the role of reflection, as well as an investigation into the importance of creativity and contextual metaphor (particularly in genres such as narrative recounts and empathy writing). The book concludes with a consideration of tradition and innovation in university student writing.

At this point, you may already be feeling a bit overwhelmed, especially if you're not familiar either with the corpus linguistic method of analysing language or with the conventions of particular writing genres. Fortunately, authors Nesi and Gardner work on the premise that not all those reading this book will be experts and have approached the writing of Genres across the Disciplines accordingly. In part one, the uninitiated and the passionate corpus linguist alike are brought up to speed as to the purpose of the book. The use of the BAWE corpus is explained, as are the base assumptions from which the book was developed. These assumptions are; students are required to write in a number of different genres; these genres are themselves defined by the language used to describe the assignments given; particular genres are favoured in certain academic disciplines, whereas other may not be employed at all; as students progress through their courses of study, they are increasingly expected to conform to the norms of their particular field, and; Globalization has had an effect on writing in English, meaning that genre norms are becoming internationally homogenized. Part one goes on to clarify what other sources of data have been utilized and how the data was examined. The fruit of their labor is the classification of the thirteen genre families which form the basis for part two of this book.

Part two comprises six chapters, each representing a specific social function. Each of these chapters revolve around the central tenet of Genres across the Disciplines, namely that it is not only students who need to establish a firm grasp of the conventions of the given genre. Indeed, it is those who find themselves in the position of setting writing tasks for whom this title will be of most benefit. It is with this target audience in mind – those with a stake in developing and assessing writing tasks – that part two unfolds.

In the 'Demonstrating knowledge and understanding' chapter, the 'Explanation' and 'Exercise' genre families are examined. These two genres are investigated in terms of how they appear across different disciplines. For example, an explanation assignment for a publishing portfolio may consist of a number of texts from different magazines, each with varied rules as to style and word limit, whereas a mathematics explanation might contain two parts, each with its own introductory and concluding sections.

The 'Developing powers of informed and independent reasoning' chapter examines 'Evaluation' and 'Argumentation' in terms of how they appear in critiques and essays. Interesting variations in how the pronoun 'I' is used in the disciplines of philosophy and English are among the differences highlighted in this chapter.

In the 'Developing research skills' chapter, the genre families of 'Research reports', 'Literature surveys' and 'Methodology recounts' are discussed. One of the findings given here is the varying distribution of these genres across the disciplines of arts and humanities, life sciences, physical sciences and social sciences. Thus, we are able to note, among the other findings, that methodology recounts should be afforded more attention as this method is by far the most prevalent.

The 'Preparing for professional practice' chapter examines a number of genres; 'Problem / question'; 'Proposal'; 'Design specification'; and 'Case study'. As with the other chapters, the differences and commonalities among these genres receive attention. For instance, one of the things that is highlighted is the fact that each of these genres seeks solutions to practical problems, the main thrust of the chapter therefore being a discussion of the varying ways in which the solutions are presented.

In the 'Writing for oneself and others' chapter, the genres of 'Empathy writing' and 'Narrative recounts' are discussed. Details are given over the differences between personal and impersonal recounts, as well as a thorough examination of the experiential cycle. By this point, we have - hopefully - been familiarized with the workings of corpus linguistics to the extent that the chapter's '4-grams' (four word lexical chunks for the layman among us) table, detailing the relative importance of the likes of 'to be able to', starts to make sense.

Each of these five chapters contains a 'The language of...' section, detailing the type of language we might typically expect to see used in written production in the genres discussed. These pages of the chapters are exemplified with concordance lines, frequency tables and lists of the most commonly used verbs and nouns in the given genre. By rounding off each chapter in this way, Nesi and Gardner are cleverly enabling the reader to take their foot off the mental gas pedal a little by presenting something a bit more concrete to work with after the heavy theory that precedes these sections.

Genres across the Disciplines rounds off with the chapter on 'Networks across genres and disciplines.' This is a fitting way to conclude this title, as it serves as a means of

measuring the extent to which the book should influence those reading it, as well as attempting to define its role within the shaping of contemporary higher education writing. This chapter doesn't focus on specific genres per se, rather it does serve as a call to arms: it fulfills the important task of reiterating the notion that there are vast differences between writing in the varying genres and that it is a duty for academics to be aware of these differences and set their tasks accordingly.

As we saw with part one, Nesi and Gardner again work on the premise that not all those reading this title will be experts and have approached the writing of the second part in view of that fact. Throughout part two examples are given in the form of figures, diagrams and tables, which aid in the understanding of the data being shared immensely. Examples are presented in as straightforward a way as possible, their relevance becoming instantly obvious as a consequence. The authors have taken great care to deliver what is ostensibly challenging material – especially to those unfamiliar to corpus linguistics – in a consistently open and lucid way.

In presenting the first detailed descriptive account of assessed writing in the UK's higher education sector, *Genres across the Disciplines* may well become essential reading for those in need of such data, such as students of applied linguistics or those seeking to effectively implement the teaching of writing into a curriculum. The authors deliver a sophisticated yet intuitively understandable framework to examine how the core functions of explaining, developing arguments, reporting research and preparing for professional life shape the writing produced by contemporary university students.

Genres across the Disciplines is no casual read, nor is it a title that will appeal to a mass market. Nevertheless, these issues should not mask the fact that it is a significant accomplishment and will serve as a quintessential text to those involved in decision making in terms assessed writing requirements in higher education courses. It should also find itself a mainstay of the reading lists on applied linguistics MA programs for the next decade at least; such is its accessibility and its revolutionary subject matter.