

COMPOSITION II ENGL 1023

Essay Assignment 4: Disciplinary Analysis*

Choose a **discourse community** that has made an impact on you or one that interests you (such as the academic discipline which you've chosen as a major) and find a preliminary answer to this research question: "How are the goals and characteristics of the chosen community reflected in its discourse?" Write a four-to-five page report that tries to answer your research question based on careful observation of the community and a rhetorical analysis of its expressive choices.

STAGE I: Data Collection

- Observe members of the discourse community while they are engaged in a shared activity; take detailed notes. (What are they doing? What kinds of things do they say? What do they write? How do you know who is "in" and who is "out"?)
- Collect anything people in that community read or write (their **genres**)—even very short things like forms, sketches, notes, IMs, and text messages.
- Interview at least one member of the discourse community. Record and transcribe the interview. You might ask these questions: "How long have you been a member of this [scholarly] community? Why did you choose to be part of it? What do [mention words from the **lexis**] mean? How did you learn to write [mention particular **genres**]? How do you communicate with other people in [mention specific situations, settings, roles, or purposes]?"

STAGE II: Data Analysis

First, try analyzing the data you collect using the six characteristics of Swales's discourse community:

- What are the shared goals of the [scholarly] community; why does this group exist and what does it do?
- What mechanisms do members use to communicate with each other (meetings, phone calls, e-mail, text messages, newsletters, reports, evaluations forms, video-conferencing, published articles, etc.)?
- What are the purposes of each of these mechanisms of communication (to improve performance, make money, grow better roses, share research, and so forth)?
- Which of the above mechanisms of communication can be considered **genres** (textual responses to recurring situations that all group members recognize and understand)?
- What kinds of specialized language (**lexis**) do group members use in their conversation and in their genres? Name some examples—TESOL, "on the fly," "86," and so on. What communicative function does this lexis serve? (That is, why say "86" instead of "we are out of this"?)
- Who are the "old-timers" with expertise? Who are the newcomers with less expertise? How do newcomers learn the appropriate language, genres, knowledge of the group?

Then, use Gee, Covino & Jolliffe, and Wardle for further ideas on how to analyze your data:

- Are there conflicts within the community? If so, why?
- Do some participants in the community have difficulty? Why?
- Who has authority here, and where does that authority come from?
- What are the "modes of belonging" that newcomers are attempting to use?

* This is an adaptation of the assignment titled "Discourse Community Ethnography" in *Writing About Writing*, 1st ed., pp. 574-576.

- What sorts of "multiliteracies" do members of this community possess?
- Are members of this community stereotyped in any way in regard to their literacy knowledge? If so, why?

STAGE III: Planning and Drafting

As you develop answers to some of these questions, start setting some priorities. Given all you have learned above, what do you want to focus on in your essay? Is there something interesting regarding the goals of the community, its rhetorical strategies, or the types of literacies it requires? What is interesting about its lexis and mediating genres?

Decide what your refined research question is and how you will answer it. Your paper ought to have the following parts or make the following moves (unless there's a good reason not to):

- Begin with a very brief review of the existing literature (published research) on the topic ("We know X about discourse communities" [cite Swales, Gee, Covino & Jolliffe, Wardle, and other relevant sources]).
- Name a niche ("But we don't know Y" or "No one has looked at X").
- Explain how you will occupy the niche.
- Describe your research methods.
- Discuss your findings in detail (use Wardle as an example of how to do this—quote from your notes, your interview, the texts you collected, and so on).

What Makes It Good?

Your assignment will be most successful if you've carefully collected the required data and if you've really focused on your research question in trying to answer it. The assignment asks you to show a clear understanding of what discourse communities are and to demonstrate your ability to analyze their expressive choices and forms of communication carefully and thoughtfully. And, of course, your paper should be a strong example of craft: thoughtfully organized, fluent in its integration of supporting sources, insightful in its analysis, and well edited.

Documenting Sources

Use one documentation style (i.e., MLA) consistently to attribute information and expression of ideas to your sources. Every time you quote or paraphrase from the sources provide the corresponding parenthetical citation. The last page of your essay should be a "Works Cited" page, which, as the name indicates, lists the sources to which you made reference in your essay.