

COMPOSITION II ENGL 1023

Essay Assignment 3: Rhetorical Analysis¹

One way to better understand the kinds of writing and thinking valued in the university is to compare them to more popular forms of writing and thinking with which you are familiar. Toward this end, this assignment asks you to find a mass media report or discussion about a scientific (including political science) finding and then trace it back to the original report from which it was taken in order to analyze the differences between the two types of discourse.

Invention

Find an interesting mass media report or discussion about science (e.g., a CNN headline, a blog entry, etc.). Trace the information back to the original research report from which it was taken. Make some initial observations about how they're different. Are there any clear similarities? Begin speculating about the reasons for those similarities and differences.

Researching and Analyzing

Analyze the differences between the original scientific report and the mass media report of the scientific finding. The technical name for what happens when a scholarly source becomes popularized is **accommodation**.

As you analyze each text, consider questions such as:

- What is the **rhetorical situation**—**exigence**, **rhethors** (writers/speakers), **audiences**, purpose, and other rhetorical aspects for each text? (If necessary, review Grant-Davie's essay.)
- What are the **genres** for each text (e.g., is one a peer-reviewed research article and the other a two-minute news report)? Is there a genre shift between the original presentation of the scientist's work and its popularization? Why was one genre not appropriate or useful in the other rhetorical situation?
- How subtly or obviously are claims stated in each? How accurately are they stated? How do the scientists state the significance of their claims? How does this compare to how the mass-media-account reports their significance?
- How are non-specialists accommodated in the mass-media piece—for example, through language change, tone change, more overt statements of significance, the use of more sweeping claims (i.e., "the only kind" or "the first kind"), placement of information in the paragraph or sentence, removal of qualifiers or hedges (i.e., taking out "appears" or "suggests"), other changes in phrasing? Why were these changes made? Do they change the meaning of the original?
- What sources are used in the original science report accommodation of it? Does the accommodation go beyond the published research to include interviews or quotations from the scientists not found in the original article? Do these interview quotations include observations and conclusions not found in the original published article? Why are these changes made? What is their effect?
- Is contradictory evidence omitted in the accommodation? If so, why?
- Are unsupportable or unsupported claims included in the accommodation? If so, why?

¹ This is an adaptation of the assignment titled "Analysis of Science Accommodation" in *Writing About Writing*, 1st ed., pp. 714-716.

- Is there any evidence that the scientists tried to refute claims accommodation? Given your analysis of information published about this research, did the scientists succeed in changing the claims made about their work?
- To your knowledge, did other scientists refute the claims of the original scientists after the original publication? If so, were those counter-arguments ever publicized?

Now step back and consider what values are suggested by the scientists' language and what values are suggested by the popular media's language? For example, do scientists value objectivity and caution more than the media? What do the popular media seem to value? How can you explain the differences?

Organization

Consider what you found by asking yourself the following:

- What are the differences between the writing done by scientists and the writing done by those in the popular media? What do these differences tell us about the values of academic writers?
- What is hard and unfamiliar to you about the scientific writing?
- How do scientists support their claims? How does this compare to how the popular media support their claims?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each type of writing?

Now plan an essay written for incoming first-year college students in which you outline how academic discourse differs from more popular discourse. In this essay, you should note various levels of difference, from values to length to tone to sources used. It might be helpful to frame your advice in terms of the values, **conventions**, and purposes of different **activity systems** or **discourse communities**. Why and how is language used differently in the university, and particularly in the sciences?

Style and Drafting

You have a variety of options for presenting the information you have gathered to your audience of incoming students:

- You might consider writing a fairly formal and traditional research paper, starting off by making the three "moves" that John Swales outlines (see the CARS model in the Introduction to *Writing About Writing*).
- You might present your information in a less formal way, perhaps as a magazine article that includes tables or visual representations of some of the differences you've found, or as an interactive Web site where you and your classmates can share your findings.

Discuss your options with your instructor before beginning.

Revising

Once you settle on workable answers to these questions, compose a rough draft of your text and check for the following:

- if you have explained how and why academic discourse differs from popular discourse;
- if you make clear claims and have enough support for each claim;
- where there are ideas or stretches of writing in the draft that cause confusion;
- which elements or sections in the draft are particularly effective;

What Makes It Good?

Once you know the differences between the science article and its accommodation, your job is to educate other students about what you have learned. You should be able to explain to them how scientific academic writing differs from more popular kinds of writing, and you should be able to help them



understand why these two kinds of writing are so different. A really good analysis will not just explain what is different but **why** those differences exist and what they mean.

Documenting Sources

Use one documentation style (e.g., MLA; APA; Chicago) 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.