



Writing Center as Genre Microcosm

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The writing center is host to a naturally occurring microcosm of writing assignment genres. In our research, we seek to understand what genres writers from across our institution bring to our writing center, and by extension, to understand what genres are assigned at our university. In order to examine the genre microcosm, we used a qualitative research design. In our writing center, post-session surveys are completed at the end of each tutorial by tutors. Tutors record the assignment title and genre the student was working on and write a few sentences about whether the student understood the assigned genre. These post-session surveys were not designed for the study but rather have been in place for years at our center and are part of the way we train tutors to attend to genre and keep focused on helping students understand the assignment. The current study took a year's worth of this data (2021-22) and qualitatively coded 1,945 post-session genre surveys, yielding a more pared-down and consistent set of genre labels than what we had from the tutors' entries alone. The outcome is a breakdown of what genres come to our writing center, which enables us to think about the genres of writing assigned at our university and to put our findings into conversation with scholarship around disciplinarity and genre.

Our analysis responds to Layne Porta Gordon's chapter "Genre Theory: A Research Approach for Understanding Learning," in Jo Mackiewicz and Rebecca Day Babcock's 2020 *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies: A Practical Guide*. In her chapter, Gordon puts out a call for more writing center research on genre, and our study answers one of her proposed research questions: "What genres do students bring to our centers most often? What do these trends suggest about the institutional dynamics of our colleges and universities?" (25). Gordon challenges us to define genre through the eyes of students and tutors in the writing center. By examining and labeling genres that come to the writing center, tutorial by tutorial, we have access to a snapshot of the writing assigned at the university from the students' perspective, and we believe this is an important contribution because much writing center scholarship on genre has relied on genre categories such as those proposed in Michael Carter's seminal article on genres at his university, "Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines." We have found important distinctions between the genres found in Carter's widely cited categories and the genres that occur in our writing center's genre microcosm.

CLIENT REPORT FORMS AND STUDY METHODS

After each tutorial, tutors fill out a client report form in WOnline, the scheduling and data collection software used by our writing center. While the makers of WOnline may envision that client report forms will be used to "report out" what happens in each tutoring session, for the past six years, our writing center has adapted the WOnline client report form for the purpose of "reporting in," allowing each tutor space to reflect on genre, along with reflecting on process and

the plans the client has for working on the writing further. The client report form survey asks the tutors to answer the following questions about genre: 1) Title of the assignment the writer was working on (short answer), 2) Describe the target genre this assignment is asking for (short answer), and 3) In your professional opinion: What is the genre the student is trying to produce, and do they understand the genre? (longer text box response). The expectation to fill out this client report form is included in tutor training, which also involves training in genre theory, though that training is not the subject of this study.

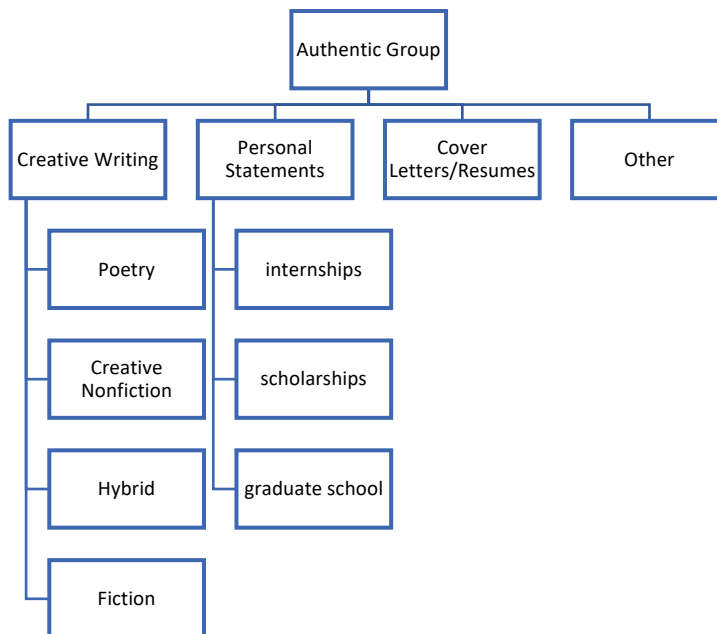
For this study, to learn more about the genres students bring to the writing center, we started with a set of genre labels that our writing center has created over years of working with the client report forms. In 2017, in response to the difficulty tutors were having with the “report in” client report form and answering what the genre was, we went through a process of analyzing a year’s worth of data according to professor assignment labels. The assignment labels are inputted by the students at the time they make the appointment. Andrew Heller, a student researcher in our writing center, created a set of labels for genres students bring to our center, using the assignment titles and the tutors’ responses, in order to winnow down assignment types into a manageable number of categories (Heller). These categories reflect, pragmatically, what writing shows up in our writing center, and we have used his categories in tutor training and as a guide to help tutors decide how to label genres.

The current researchers returned to Heller’s work for insight in inductively developing a new set of genre codes for the 2021-22 data. Since tutors at our center had been working with Heller’s genre categories for several years, the data reflected categories that were close to what he had recommended, but messy. There were missing pieces that needed to be resolved through the application of codes to a combination of three data points (the three fields named in paragraph one of this methods section). The codes used were first divided into two groups: authentic writing and writing for school (see Figures 1 and 2). The genres in the authentic group include creative writing, where we find students imagining an audience that will be reading their published work, as well as resumes, cover letters, and personal statements, where the audience will be an actual

employer or admissions officer. With authentic writing, tutors can be confident of genre.

With school writing, tutors are dealing with assignment labels such as “planning issue paper,” “major research project,” or “training evaluation.” Often, it is unclear whether the assignment is asking for a genre typical of the discipline. Is “planning issue paper” a disciplinary genre in the sense that professionals in the field, outside of the professor teaching the course, would recognize it? A writing center tutor does not know. As an example of the process a tutor goes through to determine genre, take one assignment in our data set titled “connect with me now.”

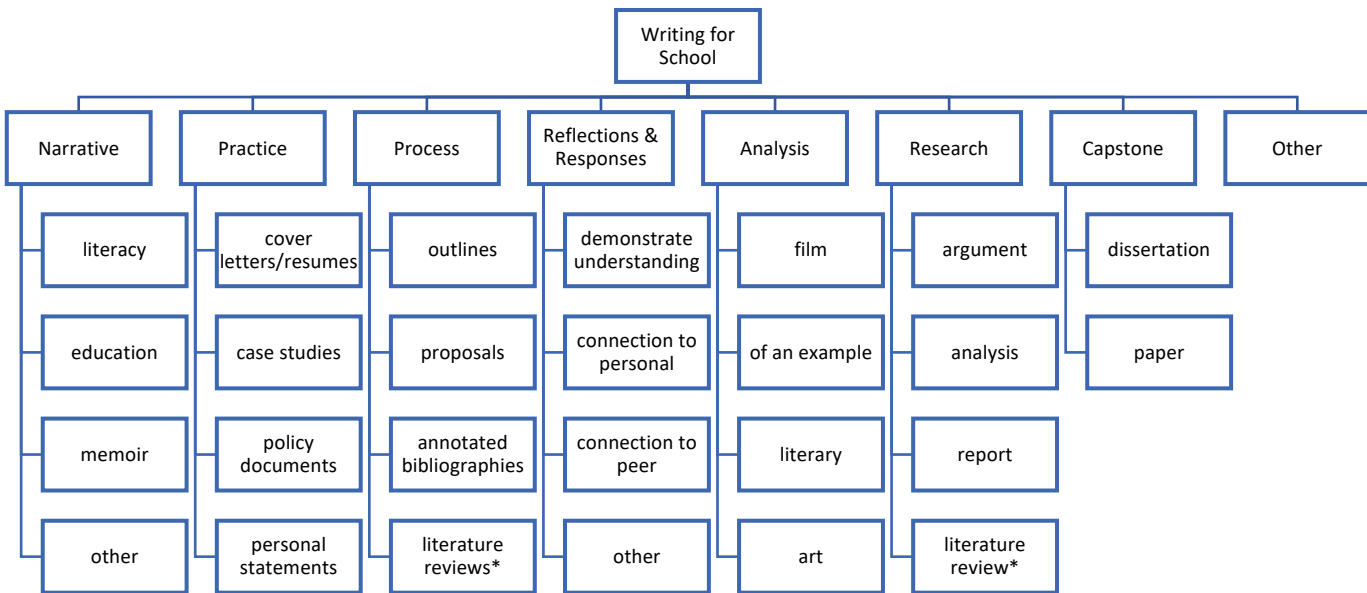
Figure 1. Authentic Group



For this assignment, the student was being asked to answer a series of questions for a Communications course. The tutor judged this to be an assignment asking for an analysis essay.

Categories for the current study are outlined in Figure 2. While any genre can call for “research” of one kind or another, our research category code was required to include citations, most often of scholarly sources. For each of those meta-categories, we had the code “other” for types of research papers or analysis that were specified but did not have a category in our coding. For each meta-category, we had the sub-category “unknown.” And finally, we had a code for unknown where no information about genre was discernible from the client report form.

Figure 2. Writing for school group



**For all codes, researchers coded first for the broad category and second for the subcategory. Thus, they first coded for “process” or “research paper,” then coded the subcode for the type of process piece or research paper. If the writer was completing an assignment in preparation for a longer assignment, the writing was coded “process.” Some process assignments were literature reviews in preparation for drafting a full paper. Other literature reviews were full research papers in the genre of “literature review.”*

Using these codes, two researchers independently coded the data set of 1,945 records, categorizing each entry according to the genre codes described above. The codes recorded by each researcher were then compared, and there was an 81% agreement between the coders. Codes for which there was disagreement between the two researchers were excluded from the following stage of analysis, yielding 1,548 coded tutorials for which genre was identified. In the following stage, the researchers focused on the category of research papers because research papers were the single largest category found in the data set (excluding disagreement) at 39%, with the second highest category being analysis papers (without research) at 18%. We then grouped courses according to discipline using course prefix and number. To derive the disciplinary labels, we used a combination of course numbers and the divisions in our university according to college. This yielded natural sciences (10 instances), social sciences (160), mathematics (1), arts (12), humanities (384), business (29), education (121), social work (113), health sciences (223), and first-year writing (318). In addition to those disciplines, 130 instances were not course related, 42 were interdisciplinary, four were in applied sciences other than health sciences, and one was for a first-year experience course (See Table 1).

Table 1. Disciplinary Assignment Counts by Genre Code

Discipline	Total Assignment Count	Research	Analysis	Reflections & Responses	Other School Genres	Authentic Genres
Humanities	384	87 (22.7%)	126 (32.8%)	38 (9.9%)	102 (26.6%)	31 (8.1%)
First-Year Writing	318	155 (48.7%)	70 (22.0%)	17 (5.3%)	65 (20.4%)	11 (3.5%)
Health Sciences	223	141 (63.2%)	11 (4.9%)	33 (14.8%)	30 (13.5%)	8 (3.6%)
Social Sciences	160	105 (65.6%)	21 (13.1%)	7 (4.4%)	24 (15.0%)	3 (1.9%)
Not Course-Related Writing	130	11 (8.5%)	5 (3.8%)	3 (2.3%)	31 (23.8%)	80 (61.5%)
Education	121	42 (34.7%)	1 (0.8%)	9 (7.4%)	66 (54.5%)	3 (2.5%)
Social Work	113	27 (23.9%)	32 (28.3%)	42 (37.2%)	10 (8.8%)	2 (1.8%)
Interdisciplinary	42	20 (47.6%)	4 (9.5%)	5 (11.9%)	11 (26.2%)	2 (4.8%)
Business	29	13 (44.8%)	5 (17.2%)	4 (13.8%)	5 (17.2%)	2 (6.9%)
Arts	12	2 (16.7%)	3 (25.0%)	6 (50.0%)	1 (8.3%)	0
Natural Sciences	10	7 (70.0%)	1 (10.0%)	1 (10.0%)	1 (10.0%)	0
Applied Sciences	4	2 (50.0%)	0	0	2 (50.0%)	0
First Year Experience	1	0	1 (100.0%)	0	0	0
Mathematics	1	0	0	0	0	1 (100.0%)
Total - All Disciplines	1548	612	280	165	348	143

Finally, we analyzed the frequency of different research paper types within each family of discipline, finding that 29% were unknown (undifferentiated by purpose, other than that they were “research papers”), 25% were asking for analysis, 19% were asking for a literature review,

13% were focused on argument, 13% were requesting a report on research, and less than 2% were asking for a different purpose.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What we saw in our analysis was a greater variety of genres from the humanities, and a lesser variety in the sciences, where research papers dominated much more heavily. The combined number of assignments in our data set from the natural sciences, social sciences, health sciences, and applied sciences was 397. Out of those 397 assignments, 255 were research papers. By comparison, for courses in the humanities, only 87 of the 384 assignments were research papers. Many of the humanities assignments were analysis (126), which included such things as rhetorical analysis and literary analysis, without research from sources. Other humanities genres were practice genres such as reports, resumes, and other (42); reflections and responses (38); narratives (23); process (18); capstones (16); and a few others.

Our conclusions suggest that guidance about metagenres and disciplinarity, such as that provided by Michael Carter, cannot be relied upon as a guide for tutors. According to Carter, there are four academic metagenres that respond to “academic learning situations” that call for 1) “problem solving,” 2) “empirical inquiry,” 3) “research from sources,” and 4) “performance” (394). Carter’s system of metagenres would predict that research papers would dominate in the humanities and be less prevalent in the sciences, but our analysis shows the opposite. Therefore, tutors’ conversations with students in our writing center cannot start from explaining the applicability of the genre to the discipline, or the disciplinary moves inherent to one course or another, but instead should start with the practical aspects of fulfilling the assignment’s requirements according to the professor’s assignment and rubric.

Taking the starting point of helping students understand what their professor is looking for (while also remaining mindful of genre) is an approach supported by Harry Denny, John Nordlof, and Lori Salem. In their qualitative study of working-class students’ experiences in the writing center, their advice is applicable for our center, which operates at an institution where 30% of the students are first generation. They say their “students’ biggest concerns about expertise had to do with knowing ‘what the professor wants,’ especially in situations in which they didn’t understand the form their final paper should take” (Denny et al. 87). In a writing center tutorial, the form the final paper should take would presumably prompt a conversation about genre, but a conversation about what the professor wants often falls short of the ideal of genre analysis set forth by Gordon in her earlier work, “Beyond Generalist vs. Specialist: Making Connections between Genre and Theory.” More often, tutors in our center help students see what the professor wants from looking at the professor’s rubric and combine that, when possible, with using genre knowledge to help the student understand the form the writing should take.

Bonnie Devet, writing in “Using Metagenre and EcoComposition to Train Writing Center Tutors for Writing in the Disciplines,” joins Gordon in advocating for the power of “genre talk” to help students. Like us, however, she grapples with the realities of assignments brought to the writing center, and accounts for the fact that they do not line up perfectly with Carter’s taxonomy of “metagenres.” For example, Carter maintains that one of his four metagenres, “responses to academic situations that call for research from sources,” is primarily the provenance of disciplines in the humanities or interdisciplinary studies that view “research not as an end in itself but as a means to an end” (398-99). If this is the case, we would expect few “research papers” from the health sciences, such as Nursing, or the social sciences, such as Criminal Justice. As suggested above, we have found this is not the case, as health and social sciences also assign research

papers, often understood by the students as “an APA research paper.” APA encapsulates the values of research and thinking in health sciences and social sciences, and professors in those disciplines emphasize adherence to the templates and guidelines found in the APA manual, assigning APA research papers as a way to rehearse the disciplinary understandings found in the manual. “Research from sources,” according to Carter, or what we coded as “research” was found in all disciplines in our analysis, but most heavily in the natural sciences (70%), health sciences (63%), social sciences (66%), and business (45%), where according to Carter’s metagenres, we would expect to find more “problem-solving” papers such as business plans and feasibility reports (coded as “practice genres” in our research), or empirical inquiry in the form of lab reports and poster presentations (also coded as “practice genres” in our research).

To turn to the implications of our research for tutor training and practice, what seems to be most beneficial to students is to help them understand what the professor is asking for, as Denny et al. suggest. Viewing the writing center as a genre microcosm, it seems that professors tend to default to labeling their assignment as some form of “research paper” even in disciplines where the “academic situation calls for problem solving” in Carter’s system. Rather than ask tutors to engage in a practice of translation, saying, “the professor calls it ‘sibling analysis research paper,’ but what this assignment is asking for in terms of genre is not like ‘research from sources’ but more like a ‘case study,’” our writing center has allowed tutors in their reflective responses in the client report form to keep their genre labels close to the labels on the assignments. In the preceding example, the tutor might write “research – analysis” as the genre description. This may skew our results in the direction of labeling some papers as “research” papers when maybe they are some form of problem-solving paper, yet this potential distortion of disciplinary exigency does reflect what the professor is saying to students about the assignment through labeling the assignment a “research paper.” Students come in asking for help with their “research papers” because that is the vocabulary their professors are using to describe the assignment.

CONCLUSION

To answer Gordon’s question, the genre students bring to our writing center most often is some form of research paper, and the disciplines in which this genre dominates most heavily are the sciences. As for what this suggests about the institutional dynamics of our university, particularly when it comes to writing across the disciplines, our research reveals that Carter’s genres of the university may not hold up in terms of what students are being assigned at our university. The view from our writing center suggests that “response to academic situation” is not the operative principle when professors assign writing. Rather, at least in the sciences, it appears that many professors use the label “research paper” when assigning writing. We suggest that the writing center should engage with the writing across the curriculum director (if there is one) to determine why this is the case. It may be that faculty have good reasons to assign research papers, as with the APA research paper that provides a way into understanding the values of the discipline found in the manual, or it might be for another reason. This research provides us with a starting point for that conversation. Furthermore, understanding what genres students bring to the writing center allows the center to train tutors to address what Gordon refers to as “the implications of a genre approach for students’ agency and inclusivity” (Gordon, “Genre Theory” 24). It has been our long-held belief that tutors who are trained to consistently start tutorials with an analysis of genre are able to begin each tutorial with an exploration of what students are looking for when they come to the writing center, which is to understand “what the professor wants.” We now know that in order to achieve this, we should spend more time working with professors in the sciences to understand what the genre “research paper” means to them.

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