

Eavesdropping on the Conversation: Situating an Undergraduate's Role within the Scope of Academic Journals

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This textual analysis of the academic journal entitled *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* will attempt to explain why professors ask students to read and utilize articles in academic journals even though undergraduate students are rarely the audience of this genre, and many students may feel that they are eavesdropping on conversations that they are far too immature to ever understand. This article will explore the intended audience of *ETC*, highlighting the presence and prominence of secondary audiences in the genre of scholarly texts. Drawing from the results and implications of the exploration, it becomes evident that scholarly journals, despite their narrow, intended audience of related professionals, are incredibly useful to students writing at any academic level.

When I wrote papers in high school, I was a firm believer in the power of a five paragraph essay. The first paragraph was given to my introduction, and the last was dedicated to my conclusion. Then, all I had to do was insert three filler ideas into the middle section and my essay was completed. I was then free to go brush my hair or talk to cute boys or whatever I did in high school. I did no research and stuck to defending thesis statements that were supported by common arguments. I had such a hard time devising three filler ideas for each essay, though, that I came to rely on the phrase *et cetera*. I thought *et cetera* was a phrase writers use when they are coming to the end of a thought but have nothing left to say, or when they want to continue forth in the same way, but have run out of examples or concepts to include. I used that word to describe many things; I used *et cetera* to explain how President Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address set the tone for Reconstruction, to elaborate on the representation of capitalism by Daisy Buchanan in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and to discuss various other concepts in my college preparatory courses. This was not a good way to write; I just didn't know how else to support my thoughts. I, like many emerging writers, relied on *et cetera* to get me through four years' worth of high school essays.

That quickly came to a stop in my introductory English class in college, however. My professor saw right through my filler ideas and the heavy usage of my go-to phrase. She asked me, “Kylie, where are your supporting ideas? Where is the research? Where is the evidence? What about the proof?” I told her that I was only seventeen years old; I couldn’t conduct research to prove a point that I wanted to make in an essay that was due next week. She then suggested I conduct writing research into a genre of writing that might be useful to me, steering me towards the existence of scholarly journals. I had no idea what she was talking about or why that particular genre of writing would be of any interest to me.

But at my teacher’s suggestion, I conducted a textual analysis of a work in that genre, a scholarly journal with the same name as my go-to phrase, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. Initially, I fought against this, because whenever I tried to read this kind of writing, I would feel incompetent and dumb, like I was eavesdropping on a conversation not meant for my ears. But I pushed forward with my research and, in doing so, I analyzed exactly *what* scholarly journals are and *who* they are for. In doing this, I was attempting to become a better user of this particular genre. After this research, I expected to be an expert at navigating scholarly journals. I never would have thought that I would be producing an article in one!

While scholarly journals certainly aren’t directly written for the typical undergraduate student, my research into the genre itself revealed that their editors don’t just blatantly ignore the needs of people outside the intended professional audience, either. Scholarly journals are formatted in a way that retains professional credibility while still remaining publically accessible, so that any undergraduate (or interested person) can successfully eavesdrop on the academic conversations within any issue.

Groundwork

To begin my writing research, I first had to determine exactly what a scholarly journal was. I had a crude, uneducated inkling of the genre; I conceptualized scholarly journals as authoritative magazines. I really didn’t understand why they existed or why professionals (much less college students) would be reading them or writing for them.

After some conversations with a reference librarian at my university’s library, I was able to determine that scholarly journals are comprised of articles about a particular scholarly topic in a particular academic field. A collected series of articles is called an issue (printed a few times per year), and a bound series of issues is called a volume (an entire year’s worth). These

scholarly articles cannot be written by an average person; professionals in their own respected field produce these articles based on the results of their own research. The articles within scholarly journals can be considered the essential parts of a larger conversation, written in response to other professionals' ideas and corresponding articles.

According to the Penn State Great Valley Library's article on scholarly journals, the writing that these professionals produce (based off of their own research) is refereed, or peer reviewed, to guarantee integrity, honesty, and accuracy. Unlike the magazines that I imagined them as, scholarly journals rarely feature glossy product advertising. Scholarly journals, in summation, represent the bound, textual organization of conversations between professionals in certain disciplinary fields.

From there, with that valuable knowledge in mind, my next step was to physically familiarize myself with the genre of scholarly journals in a general sense. I understood the concept of scholarly journals, but what did they really look like? How were these professional conversations physically manifested? To answer these questions, I spent a few hours in the "Microform" area of the Saginaw Valley Library, and I chose five separate scholarly journals.

At this time in my undergraduate studies, I was majoring in biology, so four of those five journals were focused around different aspects of biology. I figured that I may as well become acquainted with these types of journals, as I would spend a large portion of my career studying them. The fifth journal was just a random selection off the shelf, a journal about general semantics. That particular journal actually played a significant role in my decision to change my major from biology to rhetoric and technical writing, however.

As I skimmed through the journals, I became frustrated. Biology was my discipline of study; I expected to be familiar with much of the information and terminology in the journals. Yet, I was not. I was far more comfortable reading the journal about general semantics, and I took that as a sign that I should be studying that instead. However, as an undergraduate student, I was not a member of the intended audience of the biology journals or the intended audience of the semantics journal. This exclusion made me acutely aware of my seemingly lowly role as an undergraduate student. I wondered how my peers and I were expected to glean valuable information from these dense texts that comprised the genre.

Regardless, I gathered some general information about the journals: their publishers, their frequency of publication, their pagination, their intended audiences, their article submission guidelines, and their preferred type of citation. That information served to expose me to a variety of scholarly

texts, allowing me to observe and examine the most important parts that constituted each. (See an example of information I collected about one such journal, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, in Figure 1.)

Publisher	International Society for General Semantics
Frequency of Publication	Quarterly
Intended Audience	Professional general semanticists, instructors, and writers
Pagination	Continuous pagination throughout volumes
Article Submission Guidelines	Accepts articles about: 1. the symbolic environment, metaphors, the study of symbols, and human behavior in culture 2. cases of language misuse 3. instructional schemata for instructors 4. poems, diagrams, or short fiction that express ideas about symbols and behavior
Types of Citations Used	Writer's preference

Figure 1: Information about *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*

Processes of Analysis

From then forward, I narrowed my research focus to the journal *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. I chose *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* to analyze mainly because I had unlimited access to it, and it utilized my go-to phrase, the filler that I was so dependent on while writing papers in high school.

However, once fully acquainted with the physical form of scholarly journals, I quickly realized that I was not meant to read them. As I was able to determine in my initial study, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* was written for professional general semanticists, instructors, and professional writers. Most scholarly texts are written for the professionals in their corresponding field of academia or practice. So, why should people outside of that audience read them? Why was my English professor urging *me* to read these journals? I was neither a writer nor a teacher, much less a professional studier of general semantics. I didn't even know what general semantics were. I wasn't a professional *anything*. I convinced myself that I would not be able to understand any of the concepts within the journal, so I wondered how I could possibly apply them to the points that I wanted to make within an essay. I had no idea why I was being herded towards scholarly texts that were part of a professional conversation, one I was obviously excluded from.

When I was excluded from social activities and conversations in middle and high school, I would sit in my room and listen to sad music, wallowing in self-pity. But now that I was a mature college woman, I took it upon myself to determine why I was being excluded from these conversations. I decided to focus my writing research study on figuring out why my professor urged me to eavesdrop on conversations that I was not meant to hear. Though I knew exactly who the intended audience of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* was, I hoped that this study would give me some insight into why my professor wanted me to read scholarly journals.

The specific study I conducted is called an audience reception study, and to begin, I gathered the table of contents for two issues: the first issue of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* ever published and the most recent issue. I chose the table of contents, rather than snippets of individual articles, because they would give a more comprehensive view of the information within a complete volume. I then presented copies of these two documents to various participants of different occupations, skill sets, and backgrounds and had them point out words, phrases, or concepts in the table that they were not familiar with. These participants were my family and friends, and I chose them for their lack of a professional career as a general semanticist, instructor, or writer. Only one participant fit this characterization, my first participant, whom I chose to establish the standard understanding of professional instructors or writers. The participants' profiles are as follows:

1. A female professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University
2. A middle-aged male drywall contractor with an Associate's Degree in business administration
3. A female peer cashier, currently enrolled in English 212, focusing on medical administration
4. A middle-aged, female medical billing specialist, going back to college to pursue a career as a surgical technician
5. A male junior in high school
6. A male peer delivery driver with a bachelor's equivalent in audio engineering

I then gave these participants the following table, a condensed version of the table of contents from each of the two issues I looked at in my research processes. (See Figure 2)

Volume 1, Issue 1 (August 1943): Table of Contents	Volume 69, Issue 4 (October 2012): Table of Contents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Science and Values" by Edward Thorndike • "General Semantics and Modern Art" by Oliver Bloodstein • "Etcetera" by e. e. cummings • "You Can't Write Writing" by Wendell Johnson • "General Semantics and Psychoanalysis" by Chas. I. Glicksberg • "Chemical Semantics" by S. Weiner • "Changing Food Habits" by Margaret Mead • "The Brotherhood of Doctrines (1922)" by Alfred Korzybski • Plus Reviews, News, and Miscellany. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "General Semantics, Science, and Medicine: A Quality Approach" by Richard Fiordo • "Who's the Mother" by Bill Haase • "Indexing the Religious Beliefs of America's Founders" by Martin H. Levinson • "Fascism as a Semantic Void into the Meta-Narrative of Rational Modernity" by Alessandro Saluppo • Two Poems: "Foreclosure" and "Good Grief" by Peter E. Murphy • "One God" by Ed Tywoniak and Frances Tywoniak • "Objectivity--Does It Exist?" by Mark S. Tucker • "Advanced Thinking: Mathematics, General Semantics ... Ways to Improve Relationships" by Milton Dawes • "Formal Cause, Poiesis, Rhetoric: A Dialogue" by Eric McLuhan and Peter Zhang • "Bindings and Becomings: Korzybski, Deleuze, and Ecological Thinking" by Peter Zhang and Eric Jenkins • Metaphors in Action: "Two Generation Gaps" by Raymond Gozzi, Jr. • Probes: "Philosophy How?" by Peter Zhang • Plus From the Editor, Book Reviews, and Dates and Indexes
Total number of words: 67	Total number of words: 145

Figure 2: Condensed Table of Contents Given to Participants

I asked my participants, who have a variety of career pathways, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds, to point out words they were not familiar with. Because scholarly texts are, as I've described, the published conversations between professionals in a particular field, I expected the number of words, phrases, and concepts unknown by my participants to be significantly high. I remembered my frustration in trying to interpret scholarly texts in the five journals I initially collected. I could hardly imagine the anguish that I was about to put my unsuspecting participants through in this study, especially because it was based around texts in general semantics, a discipline that most of my participants had never heard of before. My results can be found in Figure 3.

Out of 67 words in the first table of contents (Volume 1, Issue 1), only three different words were unknown to my participants. Of the 145 words (including a Latin word) in the second table of contents (Volume 69, Issue 4), only five different words were unknown to my participants. Those numbers represent unfamiliarity with collections of words in professional conversations that constitute scholarly texts. Given the various backgrounds of my participants, I found these numbers astonishingly low. Essentially, I asked the participants in my study to eavesdrop on many professional conversations about general semantics, and they were able to recognize a significant portion of the words, ideas, and concepts that were being discussed. The participants were familiar with most words exchanged in an academic conversation between doctorate-

	Unfamiliar Words in V1, N1	Unfamiliar Words in V69, N4
S1 – female English professor at SVSU	---	---
S2 – middle-aged drywall contractor, bachelor's in business administration	Semantics	Semantics, Fascism, Meta-Narrative, Poiesis
S3 – 18 year old female, cashier, studying medical administration	---	Meta-Narrative, Poiesis
S4 – middle-aged medical billing specialist, nontraditional student in surgical technology	---	Meta-Narrative, Poiesis
S5 – 17 year old boy, HS junior	Semantics, Doctrines, Miscellany	Semantics, Meta-Narrative, Objectivity, Poiesis
S6 – 19 year old male, bachelor's equivalent in audio engineering	Semantics	Semantics, Poiesis

Figure 3: Results of Audience Reception Study

degree-holding professionals. I never expected that, and I began to think that maybe my professor was on to something . . .

Applicable Results

Those low numbers can suggest multiple things. They could indicate that the intended audience of the journal is not professional instructors or semanticists, but those with less education. They could also indicate that simplistic wording is the journalistic style of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. However, I believe those low numbers truly hint at the presence of a *secondary audience*. That is, the contributing writers, both in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* and many other scholarly journals, are writing for their intended, professional audiences, but they're writing in ways that are clear and accessible, free of jargon and prestigious, flashy language, so that any curious secondary audiences can learn from, understand, and utilize the valuable information within the conversations of the scholarly texts.

A journal regarding general semantics and the pedagogical nuances behind it is definitely directed towards a doctoral, professional audience. That much is for certain. And *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* (and other scholarly journals) certainly has the opportunity to use sophisticated terminology. Scholarly journals have no real obligation to use less-complex words in their articles; there is not even necessarily a benefit to doing so in journals that encapsulate such complicated topics. Because of this, the low numbers most likely hint at the overwhelming presence of a secondary audience.

While the average drywall contractor or high school junior may not pick up a volume of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* for leisurely reading, my

peers and I, as college students, are members of that secondary audience. We can find the information in the scholarly conversations very helpful when conducting discipline-specific research in our own fields of study.

This is what my English professor was pushing me towards. Despite the fact that I was not a general semanticist, professional writer, or instructor, my status as a member of the secondary audience of the scholarly text gave me the tools necessary to effectively eavesdrop on the conversations. Even though the text was not written explicitly for me, it was written in a way that I, a member of the secondary audience, could understand and then utilize in my own writing and academic career.

My membership in the secondary audience of all professional scholarly texts can help stop me from over-relying on the phrase *et cetera* in my academic essays. No longer will my own personal experience with particular topics limit the scope of my writing, and with nearly unlimited access to the conversations between professionals in any particular field, I can use facts and figures to support many points that I would have otherwise been able to write about. This is what my English professor was hinting toward; instead of relying on empty language to trick my audience, I will be able to actually support my points with statistics and suggested results.

Through this writing research, I was able to become an effective user of scholarly journals. Scholarly journals were intimidating to me, but I realized that I could benefit from them greatly as an undergraduate student. When other students are faced with a writing task that requires knowledge and expertise beyond what they currently possess, they too can utilize scholarly journals in the same way.

However, there are also opportunities for students to write about their own areas of knowledge and expertise. That's what I did in writing this article for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. In trying to figure out what my professor wanted from me, I stumbled upon some interesting patterns in the language of scholarly journals and was able to connect these choices to the journals' intended (and unintended, or secondary) audiences. Just as the writers in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* imparted their knowledge of general semantics to their audience, so am I speaking to you about my own area of expertise.

With this study, it is arguable that I have become a writing researcher. In sharing the results of my research, I am similar to the writers in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* or any other scholarly journal. I am connecting with my audience and imparting the knowledge I gained through systematic research for their benefit. Though I began this project with only the innocent

intention of becoming a better user of the genre of scholarly journals, I am now a producer of it.

Conclusion

Upon completion of this genre analysis, I have to ask the questions: why does the phrase *et cetera* exist? How did I ever rely on it in high school? How can someone come to the end of a thought? With nearly unlimited access to a constant, ever flowing thread of contemporary, innovative ideas, retrieved by merely eavesdropping on a bound professional conversation, how can someone fail to support an idea or provide evidence? With the knowledge I gleaned from my genre analysis of the scholarly journal entitled *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, that notion doesn't make much sense anymore. College students shouldn't be afraid to engage in any type of research that requires significant support; all they have to do is eavesdrop.

Afterward

While this specific writing research focused heavily on what the printed language and deliberate rhetorical strategies chosen by writers in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* implied about the audiences that it both intended and did not intend to reach, it has larger implications. Without my professor's incessant nudges, I would have never delved into the genre of scholarly journals. I would have remained terrified by the thought of them, neglecting to use them in any type of fashion in my academic career. The results of that would be disastrous. This certainly highlights the importance of writing research in a general sense.

Writing research, of any genre, allows the researcher behind it to get his or her hands dirty, to become truly engaged in the genre. He or she is allowed the opportunity to truly dissect a genre into its compositional pieces and analyze the significance of each piece in the fixed context in which the genre rhetorically exists. This makes the researcher an effective user of the genre; if they're fortunate (as I was), he or she may have the opportunity to become a producer of the genre, too. The enormous task in front of him or her, then, is to take the results of the writing research and appropriate them into a context that exists in reality.

Within the scope of my particular project, I researched the prominence of secondary audiences in scholarly journals. Then, in producing an artifact of the same genre, I too had to take two audiences into account: that audience which I was intending to write for, and that audience which I was not. As the

GWRJ serves as the textbook for Illinois State University's ENG 101 class, I intended that students enrolled in that class would be my main audience. But I also had to consider others who may read my work: my unintended audience. This audience is comprised of people that are not enrolled in ENG 101 at Illinois State University, but that may be interested in the concept of writing research. Catering to both audiences proved to be quite the rhetorical challenge, but through many, many revisions, I think the balance was finally appropriately met.

Works Cited

Penn State Great Valley Library. "What is a Scholarly Journal?". *Scholarly Journals*. n.d. Penn State University. 14 February 2013. <http://www.sgps.psu.edu/foweb/lib/scholarly_journal/index.html>.



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