# **GRASSROOTS** WRITING RESEARCH JOURNAL

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# From the Editors

Meghann Meeusen

It has been an exciting year for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, and this 5.1 issue demonstrates the depth and complexity that our authors have reached as they explore genre studies and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. Although sharing robust writing research from Illinois State University and beyond has always been the primary goal of the *GWRJ*, we celebrate our fifth year with twelve new articles that delve even more deeply into this work.

Our first three articles complicate interesting genres by examining the situations in which they are embedded. First, **Carissa Kampmeier** considers the role of audience in the production and reception of mixtapes, and **Danielle "DC" Cochran** explores the ways coupons function in both his life and consumer-driven activity systems. Following these, our 2013–2014 *Grassroots* Writing Research Scholarship recipient, **Abbie O'Ryan**, shares her investigation into professional organizations' use of Twitter, discovering that although Tweets may be brief texts, they have great complexity and variance across even seemingly similar writing spaces.

Next, two articles dig into the complexity of words. **Cristina Sánchez Martín** studies word choice by conducting interviews and considering the perspectives of international students, and **Beth Chandler** offers an inquiry into jargon, working to not only define this unique kind of communication, but also to position such language by asking questions about perception and trajectory. These articles provide in-depth study of how language works on a lexical level, and we encourage even more articles that take this approach in the future.

**Amanda K. Rinehart** continues this discussion of workplace communication by examining the ways she needed to consider and shift her identity as a writer when she changed careers, moving from writing as a scientist to composing as a librarian. **Kylie Wojciechowski** then studies scholarly writing by similarly examining how her positionality and understanding of audience collide in the genre of academic journals. She observes, like many of our writers in this issue, that our understanding of a genre can affect not only how we might compose in the future, but also how we perceive and use texts we find intimidating or complex.

Shifting from academic and workplace genres to popular texts, our next pair of articles uses Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to analyze the seductive draw of vampires. First, **Michelle C. Wright** charts the development of the vampire trope within many activity systems over centuries of time, while **Ryan Edel** dives into one popular vampire text set—Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series—using CHAT. These writers expertly utilize Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in diverse ways, demonstrating the many avenues for writing research available to those interested in CHAT.

These articles are followed by a concluding trio of essays written by a diverse group of authors. **Jillian Burgess** begins this set by examining picture books that feature superheroes, describing how she combined several research approaches—including analyzing examples, reading critical sources, and trying her hand at the genre—in coming to understand that children's texts are far more complicated than they might seem at first glance. Then, **Angela Sheets** puts this concept into practice in her text, an article in the style of a picture book that chronicles her adventures in the activity system of bus transportation in Bloomington/Normal. Illustrated by Daniel Sheets, this article shows Angela donning her meta-cognitive thinking cap to understand this system. It is followed by a collaborative article that shares an investigation conducted by a group of students who sought to improve a genre within that system: transit maps. Working together to research how bus maps function within the ISU community, they created a new text to better meet needs related to audience, purpose, and function.

We end this issue with another reprinting of "Publishing with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*," which we hope will continue to inspire writing researchers to share their work with us at the *GWRJ*. As we look ahead to our fifth year of publication, we are excited to work with writers to develop articles that highlight the nuanced and fascinating ways that individuals compose in complex and varied activity systems. We especially hope to receive more submissions that recount robust investigations into writing and offer new research approaches. We encourage writers to continually complicate literate activity by thinking about how people, tools, and situations affect writing in complex ways. Texts move through space and time, shifting constantly to reflect and shape culture, history, and individuals, and we look forward to future submissions that investigate this fluidity and all of its depth and nuance.

# It Was You I Was Thinking Of: Looking at Audience through the Genre of Mixtapes

Carissa Kampmeier

Whether we're compiling songs on tape, CD, or digital playlist, a mix is a composition that addresses some of the same features as many written genres. Looking at questions about audience in particular, this article examines the way that mixes imply or attempt to establish a relationship with another person and the process an author may go through to meet those audience expectations. From a CHAT perspective, it explores the areas of representation, reception, and distribution. Finally, the article acts as a kind of meta-mixtape, with songs about mixtapes fitted to each section of the text in place of headers. Now, press "Play!"

## 1. The Gaslight Anthem – "45"

In thinking about genres, it's important to realize that not all composition directly involves written words on paper. People communicate in a lot of different ways: through social media, through images, and through music, to name just a few. It is this last medium, not just through songs but through the compilation of them, that led me to the genre of the mixtape. A mix involves the careful consideration of content, organization, and audience that is characteristic of most written genres. If a picture is worth a thousand words, what are sixteen ordered songs and hand-drawn cover art worth? As a medium that not only tries to send a message to the reader (or listener), but also implies or attempts to build some kind of relationship with him or her, the mixtape addresses audience in interesting ways. This article will examine the way elements such as purpose, audience, and trajectory in the composition of a mixtape work together to send that message, not with words, but with songs.

 


Figure 1: Metamixtape: It Was You I Was Thinking Of

## 2. Bow Wow Wow – "C30, C60, C90, Go!"

In thinking about mixtapes, it may be helpful to define terms. What exactly do we mean when we talk about a mix? The classic definition of the mixtape includes the self-made punk and hip-hop albums that helped spread music without the help of major labels, or even what a producer does when he or she is organizing tracks for a mass-produced album. For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on the homemade mix in its many incarnations. In the hands of the consumer, the possibilities of this genre are limitless. The cassette tape first gave ordinary listeners, in their homes or in their cars, the power to listen to any tracks they wanted. As Bow Wow Wow sings, "I don't buy records in your shop, now I tape them all." From there, the mix takes on a life of its own. Songs can be put together for just about any purpose—a mix of favorite songs by a favorite artist, a mix made for a friend or significant other, or a mix with a theme like traveling or going through a breakup. As with all writing, the medium matters. Questions of audience are inseparable from questions of purpose and medium. In CHAT terms, I have to think about how a mix will be distributed.[1] For example, I might make a mix on cassette tape for my dad or Jeff Higgins, a creative writer in the graduate program, because I know they have the technology to listen to them, but I would use a CD or a playlist for my ex-boyfriend, Carson, who lives several states away and doesn't own a cassette player. If I want to share a mix with a much larger audience (say, whoever happens to read this article), I might organize a playlist on a website like Tumblr or 8tracks. Whether a mix is composed on a cassette tape, a CD, or a digital playlist, questions of what we're trying to say and who we're trying to reach will come into play. One of the most important distinctions is the matter of intention; the mix is a careful selection and ordering of songs for a specific purpose and audience. As DJ Jen Long, co-founder of Cassette Tape Day, says, "Tapes involve effort, you know? They always have" (Rogers).

## 3. The Bouncing Souls – "Private Radio"

While many mixtapes are made to be given away, perhaps one of the most frequent audiences for a mix is one's self. I have dozens of finished and half-finished playlists for going to the gym ("Gym Class Hero," "Zombies, Run!"), for falling asleep ("Goodnight Moon"), highlighting my favorite tracks from a decade ("That 70's Song"), or the handful of country songs I can stand to listen to ("Tolerable Country"). Rob Sheffield in *Love is a Mixtape* describes, "Tapes for making out, tapes for dancing, tapes for falling asleep. Tapes for doing the dishes, for walking the dog" (3). The audience element here is easy, since I know what I like better than anyone else. I don't spend nearly as much time on mixes like this; in fact, I wouldn't even call these mixes. I distinguish these as playlists (which could possibly be considered a separate genre) for two reasons: 1. They're never meant to be burned to a disc or recorded on a tape. They're on-going compilations that might include over a hundred songs. 2. I hardly ever deliberate over song order on a playlist for myself; I just put them on shuffle and let them go. I'm not trying to send a message so much as I'm setting the background music for whatever I happen to be doing at the time. Pat Griffin, in *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, describes it as "constructing my own private radio station, one that could match my teenage psychosis riff for riff, made for no other consumption than mine" (Moore 18).

## 4. Avenue Q – "Mixtape"

Of course, in the very next lines, Griffin describes the realization that mixes could also be made for girls. By far, one of the most popular themes for a mix is the couples tape. Nothing says "I love you" like the perfect song, and *Love is a Mixtape* by Rob Sheffield, *Cassette From My Ex*, edited by Jason Bitner, and *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, edited by Thurston Moore, are filled with anecdotes about love tapes gone well (or horribly, horribly wrong). As Kate Monster sings in *Avenue Q*, "Sometimes when someone has a crush on you, they'll make you a mixtape to give you a clue." A couples tape tells "the story of us." It might signal a potential romance if the mix is good, or it might be a warning sign that you're not compatible if the mix is problematic. Often, a mixtape sends a message that we may not be comfortable saying out loud. It's hard to say "I like you" or "I don't like you," but music has a way of transcending written or verbal language. I have very little experience with this kind of mix. My friend, Stephen Johnson, and I frequently swap mixes, and we both agreed once that we would never compile a list of love songs for a significant other, since neither of us would be able to listen to it. As an audience, we wouldn't enjoy that type of mix.

## 5. Los Campesinos! – "It Started With a Mixx"

However, I would closely align this type of mix with what I call personal mixes: a mix that is all about a person. It may include songs I think he would like, songs that remind me of her, or songs we might have listened to together. This is the style my dad used for the cassette tape of my favorite songs when I was a kid and the mix CD he made me for my birthday last year. They were songs that reminded him of me or songs he knew I liked or would like. I have never loved a mix more; he knew his audience (me) better than anyone. The construction of a mix for another person involves a careful consideration of audience. From a CHAT perspective, I'm working specifically on areas of representation. Who is this for? What will this person like? What shouldn't I say to that person? Language plays just as important of a role in compiling mixtapes as it does in composing. I have to think about what songs my listener does like or could like, and if I want him to listen to it again, I have to avoid songs or musical genres he wouldn't enjoy. For example, similar to the way that I would never use slang words in a formal essay, I would never put a heavy metal song on a mix for my mother. She wouldn't like it; it would be a misinterpretation of audience. In the case of close friends or family, this may not be that difficult. If I know them well enough, I'm probably already familiar with some of their music preferences. But what about making a mix for a stranger? If I don't know my audience very well, the choices become more difficult. I have to rely on a vague sense of what that person likes, along with my own aesthetic judgment on song choice and placement. It may be hit or miss; sometimes I can correctly interpret my audience and other times not.

## 6. Jack's Mannequin – "The Mixtape"

I want to examine the personal mix more closely. When my ex-boyfriend, Carson, moved out of state for college, I made him two mixes: the first was a themed mix with songs about driving, flying, or otherwise traveling ("Leaving on a Jet Plane"), and the second was songs that were all about him—how I thought and felt about him, songs we had listened to together or that just reminded me of his personality. When I asked him about them later, he said that he liked them both, but that the second one was much better! There is a very personal aspect to that kind of mix; if I considered my audience carefully enough, then there's no question why he liked it more—it's all about him, our relationship, and our memories together. Jeff Higgins compiles personal mixes differently, and his approach is unique to his perspective as a creative writer. His mixes often combine the personal with a theme; he may select tracks that remind him of a specific person in a specific time at a specific place, such as bicycling down Fell Avenue when a leaf breaks off in front of him. All of the songs on a mix like that would be chosen specifically for a certain person, similar to the way I approach personal mixes.

## 7. The Cardigans – "Erase/Rewind"

Here, representation comes into play in another way; everyone who makes mixes will develop his or her own set of genre conventions. The same way no two creative writers will share the same style, anyone who spends time with the mixtape genre will develop his or her own personal way of creating them. Where I agonize over songs that are particularly hard to place (viz. those with abrupt or especially quiet beginnings) because I want each song to flow seamlessly into the next, Jeff makes aesthetic use of these. He prefers jarring transitions between some of his songs to shake up the listener. Carson works with transition in another way by including a musical "intermission," usually an entirely instrumental song, to signify a change in the pace of the mix. Stephen does something similar by making use of the several minutes worth of "silence" at the end of a track (likely to lead into a hidden track on the album, but is problematic on a mix); he uses the silence to indicate a transition from political songs on his philosophical mix to more theoretical and personal ones. The conventions for each artist will vary. Joe Levy in *Cassette From My Ex* explains, "I had a rule against two songs by the same artist back to back. (If you had two songs by the same artist, one was on side A and the other on side B)" (Bitner). He then goes on to explain why he might break that rule to emphasize an emotion, such as heartache, the way a writer might bend the rules of grammar to illustrate a point. Again, these choices all come back to the purpose and the audience of the mix (or in CHAT terms, the representation).

## 8. Brand New – "Mix Tape"

Of course, there's the possibility that a personal mix can fail drastically. When I traded mixes with another friend, Matt, our only criteria was to choose songs that we thought the other would like or songs that reminded us of each other. The first time I listened to his mix, I hated nearly every song on it. After listening to it a few times and recovering from my initial shock, I realized what had happened. I had taken a similar route in composing this mix as I did when making my boyfriend's mix and had chosen songs that were entirely about Matt. The problem was, he had chosen songs that were about him as well, including some of his personal favorites. This mix had nothing to do with me at all. Not only was my understanding of what we were doing completely different than his, the audience he was appealing to in that mix was himself, not me. While that didn't make it *bad*, I had to readjust my expectations in order to find something that I liked about it. When I attempted to listen to the mix from his perspective and with a better understanding of what he was doing, I was able to appreciate it more. Matt's mix for me ran into some of the problems that writers can have, both in and outside of the classroom. For example, writing an e-mail to a friend is very different from writing an e-mail to a professor. If I were to e-mail a professor using phrases like, "What's up?" or "lol," it may cause problems. Many genre conventions are often set by the readers who consume that writing, as well as by the writers who create in them. When my genre expectations weren't met, I initially didn't like the mix; it didn't accomplish what it set out to do, or what I imagined it should do. In a way, I misread his mix.

## 9. Butch Walker – "Mixtape"

Of course, the audience of a mix, like with any piece of writing, can't always be predicted. When Carson and I decided to just be friends, and he said he was working on a breakup mix, I insisted that he send it to me. The mix started out with five or six sad songs and then, after his customary instrumental intermission, it transitioned into songs about feeling better, moving on, and having a good time. I trusted his mix-making ability to tell me what I needed to know about that point in our lives. In a way, it helped us both to ease some of the remaining tensions of breaking up, and it gave me a way to gauge his feelings about our breakup that our conversations couldn't articulate. After listening to it, I was relieved. I now trusted that he would be okay, that he thought we'd made the right choice, and that we could still manage to be friends. The audience here (me) was unintended. Typically, a breakup mix is probably not shared with the other partner, and the only audience Carson was initially addressing was himself. Like other kinds of writing, a mix can have unintended trajectories.

## 10. The Ataris – "Song for a Mix Tape"

In its physical format, the distribution of a mix tape or mix CD may be limited. Because it's confined to physical space, the likelihood of a mix ending up across the world, for example, is very low. Its trajectory is limited. Again, this connects to the distribution and reception elements of CHAT. If we like it, we may copy it for a friend, but most mixes will probably never leave our cars or homes except on accident. My nephew and I once found an abandoned mix CD in the parking lot of a restaurant and decided to play it on the way home; after half an hour, it was entirely clear to me why someone threw it out of their car, but my nephew liked it so much that he kept it. (Of course, being fifteen, he never listened to it again or played it for anyone else, but that doesn't mean it won't someday end up in the hands of another entirely unexpected listener). Now, if we like a mix CD, it's possible to upload some or all of the tracks to a computer. With the Internet, the possibilities of where these tracks might be distributed and taken up are endless. A mix may be received in a way its author never intended. Maybe the mix is taken apart and only a few of the songs are shared, or maybe the entire mix is posted on-line for other people to hear. In social media, mixes can be shared and re-shared. It's now possible to make a mix that never leaves the digital world, complete with song order and cover art. DJs might post examples of their playlists online in order to get hired, in which case the audience is crucial. A DJ has to consider all kinds of elements to make a playlist: What kind of music is popular now? What has been popular in the past? What do people at a party want to hear? What kinds of songs can we dance to? They not only have to think about the crowd they're playing for, but about the employers who may or may not decide to hire them based on their playlists.

## 11. All Time Low – "Lost in Stereo"

To get myself paying attention to the process I go through when I make a mix, I decided to create one as I was writing this article. It was a challenge because, while my mixes always have a message, I have never tried to fit songs with actual text before, nor have I ever tried to create a mix in which my audience might be so vast (anyone who happens to read this article). Most mixes are for one person or a few people, but the audience for an article could be many more. My theme was the metamixtape, or songs about mixtapes for a mixtape. In my third or fourth draft of the article, I thought I had a good list of tracks, and I was using them as headers for my paragraphs. Then, I had a conversation with the editor. As it turned out, she didn't understand the headings at all. She wasn't familiar with most of the songs, and she wasn't sure whether or how they were supposed to go with each section of text. I can imagine many readers having a similar problem. In the context of this article, the metamixtape completely failed. There was no way to gauge my audience; the span of it was too great, and selecting songs that made sense to everyone who read it would have been impossible. Of course, for myself and the people I know who like mixes, the metamixtape worked just fine as a mix about mixes, whether or not they were familiar with all the songs I selected.[2]

## 12. Damone – "On Your Speakers"

Whether its purpose is a theme or a personal mix, the mixtape is a creative medium of communication. All of the elements of writing, except for the actual written words, go into it. Who am I making this mix for? What am I trying to say? I have to think about my purpose, my audience, my medium, and my trajectory. If I'm working from a CHAT perspective, all of these are part of the representation of the mix. I might be trying to send a message about traveling or falling in love; I might be telling a story about another person or an attempt to capture a single moment in time. All of the aesthetics of a mix, from song choices to medium, and the way we contemplate and arrange these things, contribute to the way we "write" a mix and the message we're trying to send to our listeners or, in another way, our readers. Our success in this genre and how a mix is used or taken up from there (the reception, in CHAT terms), often depends on how well we interpreted our intended audience.

## End Notes

[1] CHAT, or Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, is a way of looking at the complex ways in which writing and other activities happen in the world given their specific situations or circumstances (which are affected by their place in history and cultural factors).

[2] To access the metamixtape or any of the other mixes mentioned in this article, you can visit my profile at http://8tracks.com/sixtiepixie.

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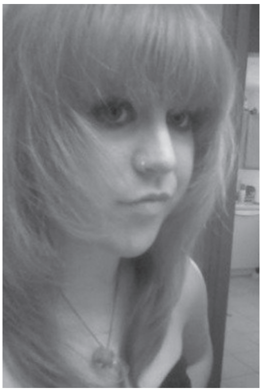

**Carissa Kampmeier** is a Master's student in the English Studies program. She enjoys reading contemporary fiction, watching more than the recommended dosage of zombie movies, and making mixtapes.

# C.R.E.A.M. (Coupons Rule Everything Around Me)

Danielle "DC" Cochran

As a consumer, a person must be conscientious about getting the best deal. C.R.E.A.M. (Coupons Rule Everything Around Me) focuses on how Danielle and his wife (Marissa) operate within the activity system of coupons, which serve as a central connection between consumer and manufacturer. This article looks at (a) coupons themselves as artifacts, (b) the trajectory of coupons to consumers and manufacturers/retailers, and (c) a more personalized approach of how individuals in the same household use coupons to save money, but utilize a different system to do so.

*"Wise men say: 'Forgiveness is divine, but never pay full price for a late pizza!'"*
*—Michelangelo, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990)*

As iconic as the dialogue from the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie may be for my '80s babies out there, it has some fundamental truth regarding spending money. Given that Michelangelo is hassling the Domino's pizza man after being late since he could not conveniently find the building location to deliver the pizza (because this location was the sewer), the bottom line is: who wants to pay full price for anything? In an age of *Groupon*, *Living Social*, and *Amazon Deals* for online bargain shoppers and television shows based on extreme coupon users who manage to buy hundreds of dollars worth of food for under $10, we are living in the age of savings. So what serves as a key component that connects consumers and producers? Give up? The answer is a coupon! While one may see the coupon as just a piece of paper, email, or a scan code for discounting, there is so much more going on in this economically influenced activity system.

 

## So Why Are We Here?

Have you ever gone shopping and seen something on sale, but thought that it was too much money to spend on the product? My wife and I do all the time, but we look for ways to supplement the sale prices with additional savings by using a coupon, price comparison, or other methods for a better deal. We would consider ourselves very frugal spenders. Not cheap, but frugal. If we can find a deal for something we want, we will purchase it to save money overall. This bargain hunting has particularly manifested itself as I have moved into graduate studies and lost full-time income. With this in mind, we have done a lot of shopping for deals and sales. I tend to find discounts and coupon codes for electronic items/big ticket purchases, but my wife is on a whole different level. She actually has a process in which she organizes coupons by the date of the insert[1] and their expiration.

I thought, based on my wife's couponing habits, it would be a great idea to write about the couponing process as an activity system and also the coupon as an artifact itself that moves between three worlds: manufacturer, retailer, and consumer/customer.[2] I observed the use of our couponing and how it functions within the system of what the coupon is meant to do. I decided to look at the following things to determine how my family operates within this economic-based activity system of saving and spending: What is a coupon? How does a coupon operate in an activity system that it creates? How does my family fit into this activity system? What are the pros and cons of couponing, and how can you save money as a student? I think this is especially important because students should know how to still enjoy themselves and not spend a lot of money. It's all about getting the most for your money without having to spend it all.

## So What is a Coupon?

I know that I have not addressed definitions, so let me delve into the world of the coupon a little bit further. A coupon can best be described as "a ticket or document that can be exchanged for a financial discount or rebate when purchasing a product" (Wikipedia).[3] On a more general level, there are two types of coupons: a manufacturer's coupon or a store coupon. A manufacturer's coupon is created by the producer of a specific product to solicit customers to purchase it because of the discount; you are more likely to see a manufacturer's coupon on popular household products or new items from that manufacturer. A store coupon would be based on a specific retailer offering discounts to attract consumers to purchase more with that store.

You could find the manufacturer's coupon a couple of different ways. One way is by going to the website and signing up for emails or texts with that company. Usually they offer incentives for signing up, which come in the form of discounts or coupons. Another way is visiting social network sites connected with the manufacturer. For instance, if you "Like" a brand on *Facebook* and watch a hosted video, you can receive a coupon that can be printed or emailed for you to use in the store. This is also very similar to how stores solicit and distribute their coupons, but we can also add in the ability for stores/retailers to substitute coupons for gift cards. You can also find both types of coupons within Sunday newspaper advertisements called "inserts."

Stores also attract customers with "store sales cycles," better known as "loss leaders." According to Angela Russell (coupon expert blogger), "loss leaders" simply means "the store may take a *loss to lead* you into the store. These deals are very hot and often are splashed across the front of weekly ads." One example of "loss leaders" or "store sales cycles" would be Black Friday sales. This is considered a sales period for retailers that begins the day after Thanksgiving to attract customers to their stores with discounted prices on big ticket items (name brand electronics, clothing brands, accessories, etc.) in hopes that people will purchase these and other items that may be on sale. A contemporary example of a "loss leader" is the concept of a *Groupon*. *Groupon* is a pay-for-deal site that offers customers a discounted price on items or services for a higher value in return. For example, *Groupon* works with Target to offer $10 gift cards for $5. One could also connect this pay for couponing as a loss sales tactic because stores are offering discounted gift cards in hopes that they attract more money from the purchase of *groupons*, but at the sacrifice of lowered prices. This would also be common to other pay-for-discount places like *Amazon Local*, *Living Social*, and *Google Offers*.

## Coupon Activity System

We can look at the coupon as an activity system in two different processes: one from the perspective of the manufacturer/store and another as a consumer (Figure 1).

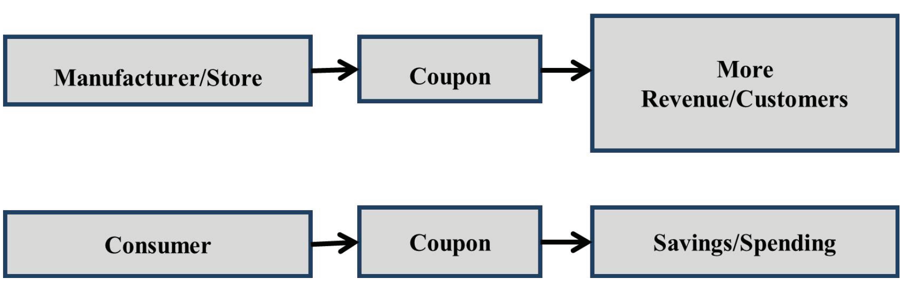


Figure 1: Two Different Processes of a Coupon

In Figure 1, we can see that the coupon serves as a twofold process. The first instance is that the coupon is used by a store or manufacturer to solicit customers to come in and spend money on discounted items. The second way we can look at this is a consumer using a coupon as a way of purchasing items without having to pay full price for them. Now let's combine the separate processes from Figure 1 and look at the coupon the following way in Figure 2.

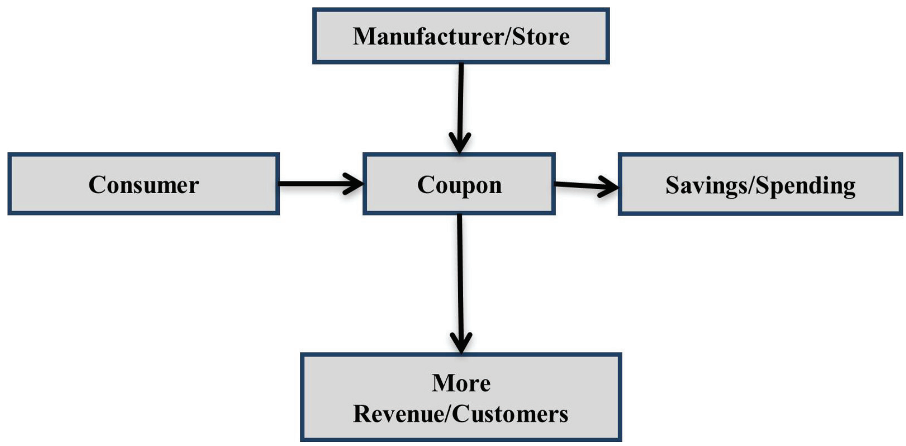


Figure 2: The Coupon as an Artifact that Brings Two Separate Entities Together

As you can see, the coupon serves as a mediary artifact in this system to connect the consumers and manufacturers/retailers. The coupon also serves as a double-edged sword to both the producers and receivers. The producers (manufacturers/retailers) will often discount their product in order to attract customers. So again we can see the use of "loss leaders." The receivers (consumers/customers) will likely save money in the short term based on the sale, but are also more apt to purchase items they would not necessarily need or want because of the discount. So here we have an example of the coupon serving as the connection between the customer and the retailer/manufacturer, but also at a cost to both.

We can even consider this process in the origin of the first coupon. In the article "Prototype: Coca-Cola and the Birth of the Coupon," Megan Geuss (a reporter for *Wired* magazine), references the first coupon as a promotional item (Figure 3). Guess states:

> John Pemberton invented Coca-Cola in 1886, [but] not even that adrenalized ad slogan could persuade customers to try it over all the other carbonated wonder tonics on the market. His bookkeeper started giving away tickets for free tastes of Coke, but Pemberton chided him for "extravagance." Then along came tycoon Asa Griggs Candler, who bought the company in 1888, picked up on the bookkeeper's idea, and mailed out thousands of the ticket shown [in Figure 3]. The coupon as we know it was born.


Figure 3: The First Coupon Ever Created

As we can see, there is an underlined intention of business promotion and customer attraction by the manufacturer. At the same time, we are seeing customers taking advantage of the product because it was "free-ninety-nine!" This also shows the company is willing to take a loss in order to attract more and future customers. Moving to a more contemporary time, we see that the function of the coupon still serves the same purpose.

We can also look at this system on a personalized level. The coupons serve as an influence for us (The Cochrans) to solicit a particular store (Figure 4).

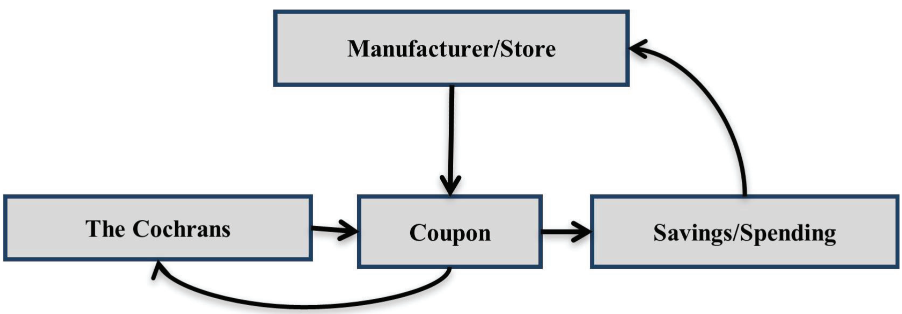


Figure 4: The Cochran Family's Couponing Process

A more modernized approach to couponing and getting customers into stores is connected to their mobile devices. Smartphone apps like *ShopKick* (free in your app store) give customers points for just turning on their location services and the app when they walk into certain stores. Customers can also get points for scanning specific items within the store. These points can be accumulated to get gift cards to select stores. For instance, if I were to walk into Best Buy, I would open up the *ShopKick* app to get points just for visiting the store. The app recognizes my location based on the GPS positioning and awards whatever points may be available (usually ranging from 50 to 150 points). I can then also scan items in the store and get more points. Plus, if I decide to purchase something, I will receive reward points for that particular purchase. If there are enough points accumulated, I can then request a gift card (amount depending on points) to use at any specific retailer of my choice. Let's look at this mapped out.

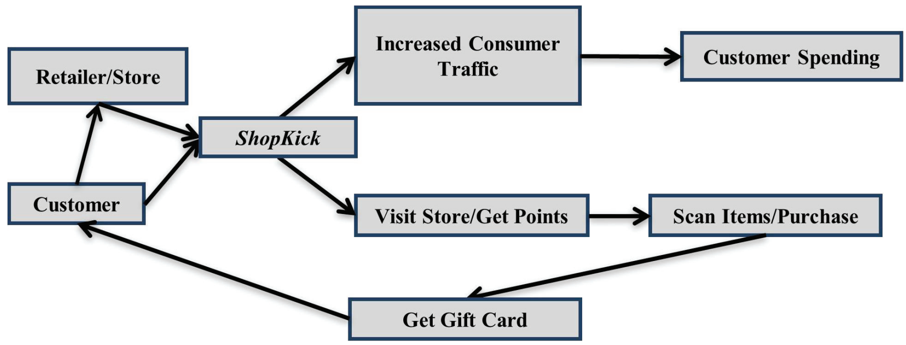


Figure 5: *ShopKick* as a Mediary Artifact between Customers and Stores

As we can see in Figure 5, the *ShopKick* app also serves as a mediating artifact for the retailer and customer. From there the intention of the app serves various purposes: *ShopKick* attracts more customers to the retailer to spend, while it also leads customers to visit and get points for scanning and/or purchasing an item in order to receive a gift card that brings them (customers) back to the retail store to spend more money. This can get pretty complicated. So how does this work in my family?

## The Process (My Point of View)

In order to understand this couponing process from a personal level, I observed the ways my wife and I coupon to show you how in-depth her couponing approach is compared to mine. We try to do our best to balance out the fiscal saving responsibility, but she is much better at the household and grocery items, while I am better at the big ticket items (electronics, furniture, etc.). This is how we work together to save and focus our spending to particular things we may want for our household.[4] We can consider this a self-ethnographic observation of how we interact in this coupon activity system.

I tend to focus on a lot of price comparison and reward point programs. For instance, Best Buy has the best rewards program when it comes to buying electronics. You can stack this points-for-purchase incentive on top of the price comparison that Best Buy will do against any product from a list of nationally recognized vendors on their website. With enough points, you can also receive an in-store gift card for any item that they may sell. This is why I do all of my electronics shopping at Best Buy. On some days, you can also get three times the amount of points based on a purchase (these are called "Triple or Double Rewards" days). So if you get 1 point for every dollar you spend, you are getting 3 points for every dollar you spend on "3x" the reward point days. If you are constantly shopping at a retailer, you also may want to look into getting a department credit card, because they offer extra incentives, as long as the interest rate is not too high. With the points received from a department store credit card, the rewards points for purchasing, and price comparison, I can usually walk away paying 20% less than the original price and have at least $20 in gift cards coming back to me. One cool thing that I like about Best Buy is their reward program for reserving a video game, but you have to pay for a subscription to their video game magazine to take full advantage of it. However, the savings from investing in this magazine subscription only benefit video games, so if you are not a gamer then it is not worth your time.

My knowledge regarding retail shopping comes from my previous experience being employed at a place I will not mention because of the information I am about to share. One thing I have learned is that sales are not always sales. Some companies will mark up a price and then say the item is on sale by offering the item at a discounted price, which will take it back down to the original price. For instance, if a shirt is originally $20.00, a retailer can mark this shirt up to $25.00 and then offer a 20% discount, which could take it back to its original price, but since it is a sale people may think that they are getting a good deal. Another thing to look at is the original sticker price of an item; besides certain electronics (video game systems specifically), that price is marked up in order to make a profit for the retailer. This is also true when it comes to house brands for retailers because they control the price of the product with limited cost to produce the item(s). My experience in retail has contributed to how my family views deals and if the price is worth paying. Again, this is part of my evaluative process.

## The Process (My Wife's Point of View)

In order to get my wife's perspective on her process, I developed a set of questions I thought were pertinent to accessing her couponing system by focusing on the filing, collecting, and spending process. I then sat down with my wife to understand how she does this "magical" couponing process and get her thoughts on the pros and cons of this couponing activity system.[5]

Figure 6: Elise Going Through Sunday Paper Inserts

**Me:** Good evening, love! Let's start off with a simple question: When did you become interested in couponing?

**Marissa:** I started couponing seriously about three years ago. I remember, even as a child, having an interest in couponing for whatever reason. I remember getting the inserts out of the Sunday paper and clipping coupons for things that my mom might need, or we need in the house. But I seriously started couponing about three years ago. I always used coupons for clothing items or the little type of shopping for the household that I would do, but once I started having to pay for more things for myself, I started couponing more seriously. When I got married and started to help run a household, I started to spend and put more time into couponing because I was seeing a greater savings when I was buying stuff for a household instead of just for me.

**Me:** So it is basically when you learned that you would be spending our collective money you changed your habits? *Sly grin, but Elise does not seem amused and gives a look of disapproval, which means I need to change the subject.* So can you tell me about your coupon process?

**Marissa:** Okay, to make it as simple as possible, every Saturday I get newspapers. The Chicago Tribune Sunday edition actually comes out on Saturdays, so I always get newspapers. It was recommended to me to buy enough newspapers for the people in your house plus one, so for me I buy three newspapers. This is recommended because it allows for you to cover all the people in the household and then have another insert to use for later purchases, which helps you build your couponing stockpile. For me, if I can, I like to buy my newspapers from Menards, Deals, or Dollar Tree because they typically sell their papers for $1.00. If not, I get it from somewhere else where they [newspapers] are $2.00. Typically I would take the inserts from one of the newspapers and clip the ones I can use. The other inserts I keep in a file box (Figure 6) that I file by dates so I can go and reference them later. Maybe I can use one coupon later. Besides the newspaper resources, I use online resources like *Coupons.com* or I sign up for newsletters with places that I like to use. I also use mobile coupons from various stores like Target, get coupons in the mail, and also from online blog sites like *Double Saving Divas* and *Sister Save-A-Lot*.

Figure 6: The Coupon Filing System

So once I have my coupons clipped, I will file them away in three places that I might use my coupons on a daily basis. I have one file for assorted coupons, one for grocery coupons, and a separate folder for Target coupons because with Target coupons they have several store coupons that you can match up with manufacturer's coupons that are exclusive to Target stores, which allows you to save a lot more money.

**Me:** So besides Target, what are your favorite inserts?

**Marissa:** Redplum, Smart Source, & P&G. However, sometimes P&G coupons aren't that great.

**Me:** Now that you have explained your couponing process, can you tell me what you consider as pros to couponing?

**Marissa:** The obvious pro to couponing would be saving money. One time I kept track of just how much money I saved with couponing during one month, and it was upwards of $300, and it was for normal purchases. So definitely saving money was the pro. Another pro would be being able to purchase the items that you like at a discounted price, which you can then create a small stockpile of items to have at home so one does not always have to go out for small things like toiletries and canned goods.

**Me:** Of course, saving money is good, and there is a lot of value in couponing, but can you discuss some cons to couponing?

**Marissa:** The cons to couponing are if you are not disciplined and not careful, you end up spending more money than you intended to. You have to be careful because sometimes the saving will look real good, but when you look at it you aren't actually saving more money, especially when it comes to food. There have been times where I bought food because I had a coupon and ended up throwing it away because it was a good deal, but it expired, so you have to be careful about that. Also, coupons maybe save $1.75 when you buy two items when you only needed one item. Although you may save money on a particular item, you end up spending more on an additional item that you didn't need.

The second thing is the time. It can be very time consuming trying to coupon, especially depending on how you shop or how organized you are. It can take a good hour sometimes, or more sometimes, to plan a shopping trip when you are shopping with coupons to get a really good sale. This is also because you are doing price comparison on who has a really good deal. So for instance, if Target has a really good deal and you don't live near a Target, you are taking the extra time to go to a Target, which is actually not saving you money when you look at gas and things like that. So you have to be really disciplined about going after sales and also realize that you won't get every sale. So the two biggest cons would be it is time consuming and you could actually spend more money.

Also, I would like to add that sometimes it is not good for your health. If you look at what coupons are available, the majority of the time they aren't necessarily the best things to eat like processed and packaged foods, or foods that are loaded with a lot of sugar and fat. Not all, but I will say the majority of them aren't always going to be the best for you. I know for us in our household, we do a whole lot of cooking, and I mean real cooking. I don't mean the heating up of frozen food. So when I am couponing I am not necessarily saving money on food, but more so on household items and toiletries. In that perspective, you might want to look at it as a hobby so you don't spend too much time over it.

**Me:** Well, thank you for the interview and the money you save us!

**Marissa:** Of course, love!

## Passing the Savings

As you can see, the coupon serves as a magnet to get customers to the retailers in order to spend money. We (The Cochrans) use coupons and other means of saving to get the items that we want while reducing the amount of money spent. We are as much a part of the coupon activity system as the manufacturers and retailers because in order for the coupon to serve its purpose both provider (manufacturer/retailer) and consumer (you) must play a role in keeping the process active. However, understanding the importance of coupons, you have to be careful that you are not spending more money trying to save than actually saving.

In conclusion, we see that coupons are more than just small pieces of paper that offer discounts on various merchandise; more importantly, we can trace how the trajectory of their use has evolved over time to online discount codes and smartphone apps. Coupons serve as a shared space in which customers and stores interact to negotiate purchasing power. The genre of coupons within the financial activity system of family can offer amazing benefits, allowing you to save money and get the things you want and need for reasonable prices. I hope that you can benefit from our (The Cochrans) wisdom and learn to never pay full price for a late, early, or on-time pizza!

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[1] Inserts are small magazines that contain coupons that typically come with Sunday newspapers.

[2] If you want more information about activity systems and CHAT, check out "Just CHATing" by Joyce Walker in the GWRJ Vol. 1, available online through the GWRJ archive at http://isuwriting.com/grassroots/.

[3] Although it is uncommon to use Wikipedia as a source in an article like this, one can find valuable information on the site and in the reference section of the particular topic. I chose this definition because it offered the best information for this particular text.

[4] You can look at your own daily habits as a form of researching. This is also effective in trying to develop writing habits that allow you to figure your strengths and weaknesses to make you a better writer.

[5] Interviews are an awesome way of doing writing research, especially if you know someone in your family or a friend who has the expertise in a field you have interest in researching or writing about.


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# CHAT: Four of One Hundred and Forty Characters

Abbie O'Ryan

In this article, O'Ryan explores the effects of CHAT on organizational Twitter accounts. Alpha Gamma Delta, *The Vidette*, and City Dance are organizations in O'Ryan's social, university, and community life. Here, O'Ryan relates CHAT to the communication choices made by these organizations through each of their Twitter accounts. Her article describes how the characteristics and trajectories of each account build an understanding of its goals and its effects.

Today while I was waiting for Chemistry to start, I grabbed a newspaper in the hallway, sat down, and flipped through the pages. The largest headline on the page exclaimed that *The Vidette* had gone mobile! My first thought was, "Well, that doesn't affect me. I don't have a smart phone." But as I looked up and down the hallway, I reminded myself again that I was in the minority. There were about twelve other students sitting around in that hallway, and ten of them were using smart phones. Cell phones are not just about calling or even texting anymore. The variety of forms of communication ranges from an email to a Facebook status update and from a Pinterest board to an Instagram picture. In mainstream America, just one form of communication is no longer acceptable. Communicators today need to be stimulated in more ways than one. We need to send and receive messages on multiple platforms to best send and receive ideas. We are constantly interacting with people and organizations. So whether it is a newspaper headline, a lengthy blog post, or a one hundred and forty character tweet, how does a communicator get his or her message across successfully?

I asked myself this question, and instantly, a research project was underway. I chose one of the newest communication genres, Twitter, and began to dig deeper. Who uses Twitter? How is it used? Does everyone use it in the same way or do different users take varied approaches?

I found that three organizations in my life use Twitter. I chose these organizations because each one affects a different part of my life. Each organization also has a different purpose. I wanted to find out if the differing purposes would be reflected in each organization's Twitter account. Though these three organizations all use the same social media platform—Twitter—to communicate, the purposes, content, and results are different. I wanted to find out what these differences mean and how they produce different effects.

The three organizations in my life that I know use Twitter are Alpha Gamma Delta (social), *The Vidette* (university), and City Dance (community). The "social," "university," and "community" labels on these organizations represent where each of these organizations fits into my life as a college student. Alpha Gamma Delta is very close to me. I know all of the members; I am very involved, and I hold a position. *The Vidette* is my university's newspaper. I pick the paper up from time to time to find out about what is going on around campus and throughout the world. City Dance is a non-profit community organization. I had the chance to work on the public relations team for this organization and therefore got to experience how the organization runs from an internal as well as an external standpoint. In my research, I searched for what kinds of Twitter communication occur in each of these organizations.

Twitter has become a crucial communication practice in both large and small organizations all over the world. A short, to-the-point message, like a tweet, keeps audience members involved and in-the-know. This knowledge was the basis of my research question: why and how have these organizations chosen to use Twitter, whether as a primary or a supplementary form of their communicative practices? In order to answer this question, I first had to understand the communication practices of each organization. The following data is what I found.

## Alpha Gamma Delta: Social

Alpha Gamma Delta (AGD) is an International Women's Fraternity. The Beta Omicron chapter of Alpha Gamma Delta includes just over one hundred women on the Illinois State University campus. AGD primarily communicates internally. Chapter meetings are held each Sunday to update members on new and important information for upcoming events. Minutes from the chapter meeting are sent out to members via Facebook and email, and they are also sent to the International Headquarters. Other official communications of the fraternity, both locally and internationally, often occur through email. Members also communicate face-to-face in the chapter home and throughout the campus. This personal communication also happens through phone calls and text messaging. Finally, the Beta Omicron chapter stays connected with international sisters, including chapters all over the United States and Canada, through social media like Twitter.

## *The Vidette:* University

Though there is a great amount of internal communication that goes on at *The Vidette*, this organization's primary goal is to get information out to the public. *The Vidette* is Illinois State University's student-run newspaper. It is published four days a week. The newspaper itself is probably *The Vidette's* most important form of communication to the Illinois State campus and the surrounding community of Bloomington-Normal, but it is by no means the only one. At *The Vidette*, reporters, editors, designers, and photographers communicate with each other to make sure news stories are correctly put together. Reporters communicate with officials, experts, and the public to find information to write news stories. The news department communicates with the advertising department to decide how the paper itself will be divided up. And finally, editors communicate with printers to finalize the finished product. *The Vidette* posts headlines via Twitter to keep up with the changing technological world that is slowly moving away from print news. The Twitter posts then link to *The Vidette's* website where more information can be found, including full articles, videos, and blogs.

## City Dance: Community

As *The Vidette* has recently made a large push towards using the internet and social media, so has City Dance. City Dance is a non-profit organization in Peoria, IL. Its mission is to "change lives through dance and arts mentorship." City Dance teaches kids how to dance in order to give them something to do, to give them something to believe in, and to keep them out of trouble. Thus, City Dance communicates with children, families, the surrounding community, potential donors, and members of the professional break dancing community. To do this, they have a website, email updates, a blog, and social media accounts, including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

As you may have noticed, Alpha Gamma Delta, *The Vidette*, and City Dance use some similar and some different communication practices. In my research, Twitter is the one commonality between those practices, and thus my research focus.

After I had a grasp on the details of each organization, the second step of my research was to understand the medium of communication itself: Twitter.

## Twitter

Twitter is one of the newest social media websites in comparison to others, such as Facebook and MySpace. A Twitter post, commonly known as a "tweet," can only be made up of 140 characters. Therefore, a writer must strategically choose how to compose a message to come across effectively in a small amount of words. Choices like these are made in all forms of writing. A news story must be written in the inverted pyramid style. A film must have a character going through complications, climax, and resolution. These genre conventions make each piece effective. An effective tweet gives the audience a blurb of information or an update so they can know what is going on. An effective tweet should be informative and to the point. It should only contain one main idea or piece of information. The information in a tweet should give the reader a basic understanding of the subject. If the reader chooses, he or she may look for more detailed information elsewhere. On the other hand, an ineffective tweet leaves the reader confused and always looking for more regardless of personal interest. The ineffective tweet lacks a definitive subject and action.

So once I had ascertained the dynamics of three different organizations working with one medium, next I wanted to find out the causes of the differences in each organization's Twitter accounts. How and why are the uses of 140 character tweets and the layout of Twitter profiles so different across organizations? I found the explanation to this question in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory.

## CHAT and Twitter

There are many different factors that will influence an organization's communication, including a tweet. What is the goal of the piece? What are the common conventions of the genre? Who is creating it? Who is editing it? What is the organizational environment like? Who is the intended audience? Where do all those people come from? What is their worldview? What kind of mood are they in today? All of these factors, and more, can be explored with CHAT. This theory, according to Joyce Walker, covers "how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices." Put a little more simply by my English 101 instructor Sarah Hercula, CHAT explains the effect "of a text on society and of society on a text." Everything from the production of a piece of writing to dinner table discussions after interacting with that piece of writing is part of CHAT, which includes the input from, or lack thereof, and the effects on, or lack thereof, the author and the audience and everyone in between. With that said, CHAT includes consideration of not only the factors that affect the making of the text, but also how it is received. From the perspective of a writer, understanding the implications of CHAT allows a person to communicate more effectively. If you consider all of the circumstances that may be affecting you (the sender) and the audience (the receiver), you can make choices to help you communicate in the most efficient way possible. What is more, this also goes for the reverse when you are the receiver.

When applying CHAT to Twitter, we must think about what components make up a Twitter page. It is not just the tweets themselves that are the communication, but the entire Twitter account. The tweets, layout, followers, and pictures of the account are all communicating something. The audience, consciously or not, interprets a message from all of these components. What message is communicated from the color, word choice, and content of a Twitter account? A communicator who uses or thinks about CHAT makes active decisions to account for the effect that he or she has on these components and the effect that the components have on the audience and everything in between.

For example, *The Vidette* conducts its Twitter communication in a very professional manner. Complete sentences, informal language, and article links are all included in *The Vidette's* tweets. The content includes news, self-promotion, and organizational accomplishments. The Twitter profile layout includes professional photography and graphic designs to provide legitimacy.


Figure 1: *The Vidette's* Twitter Layout

All of these choices speak directly to *The Vidette's* audience, which is made up primarily of Illinois State University students and Bloomington-Normal community members. The layout and sentence structure used ensure that *The Vidette* is taken seriously. The conventions of the Twitter profile follow proper newspaper conventions as much as possible. This includes using short and to-the-point headlines, or in this case, tweets, displaying a simple yet visually appealing layout, and employing an interesting tidbit of information to convince the reader to read on. At the same time, there is enough informal language and message content to ensure that the attention of a college-aged audience isn't lost.


Figure 2: *The Vidette's* Sample Tweets

Unlike *The Vidette*, Alpha Gamma Delta primarily uses Twitter to connect with active members and alumni. Much of their content includes updates, accomplishments, reminders, and retweets. Retweets repeat what another Twitter user has already tweeted. This is commonly done to share and to raise awareness of the tweet with a broader audience. All of this is done to inform followers and to connect members across international borders. Members of Alpha Gamma Delta have common goals and values and build camaraderie through celebrating accomplishments together via Twitter.

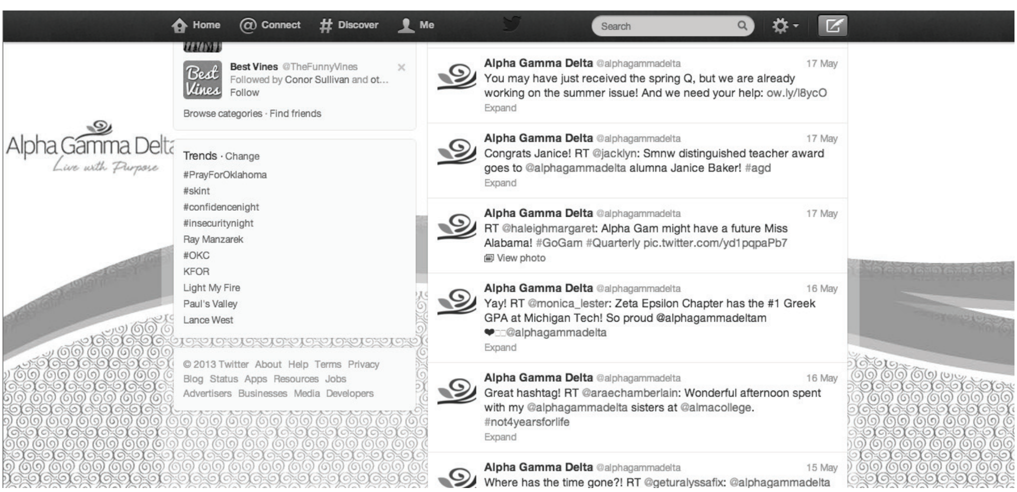


Figure 3: Alpha Gamma Delta Sample Tweets

This type of information, released by AGD, is not intended to grab an exterior audience, but to manage and enhance the experience of women who are already members of the organization. The layout is professional, and the inclusion of the organization's logo reflects Alpha Gamma Delta's status as an international organization, but the language and sentence structure is often informal because the audience primarily consists of collegians interacting outside of an academic setting.


Figure 4: Alpha Gamma Delta Twitter Layout

The Twitter account associated with City Dance is much more informal than that of *The Vidette* or Alpha Gamma Delta. The main profile picture is the organization's logo, but the rest of the layout is supplied by Twitter's settings options.

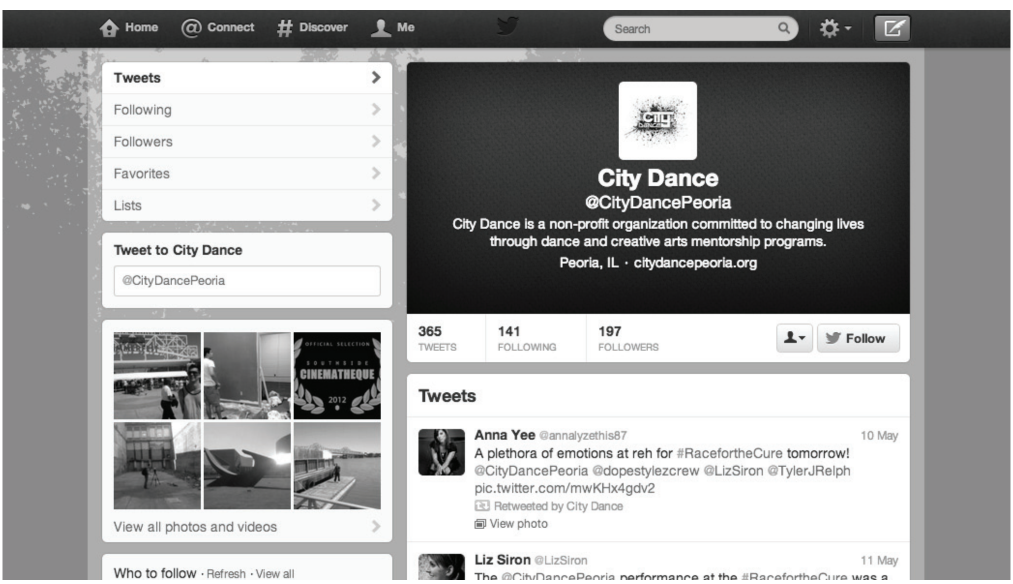


Figure 5: City Dance Twitter Layout

The content of this account includes informal language, fragments, "txt speak," retweets, responses, updates, and promotions. City Dance takes a personal approach to reach out to the community.

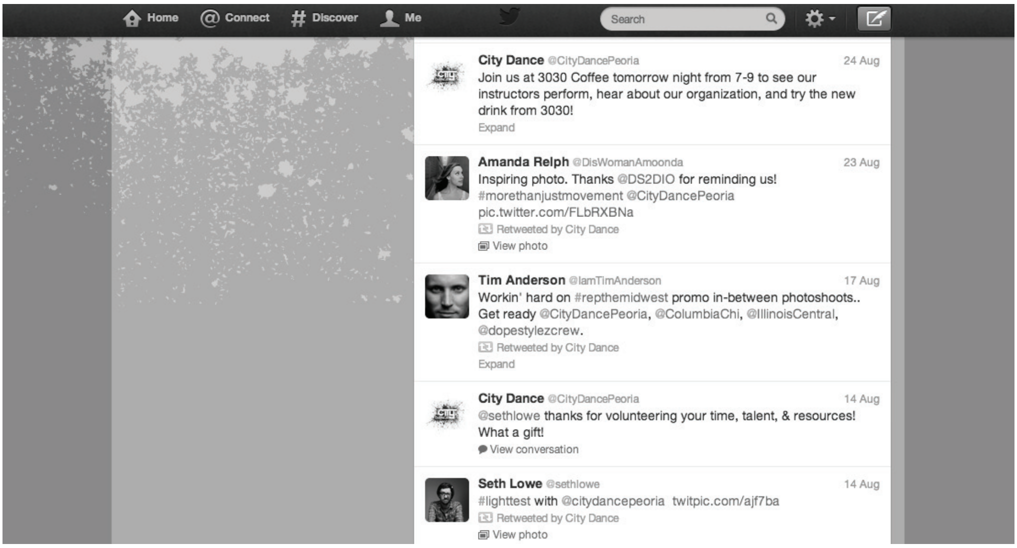


Figure 6: City Dance Sample Tweets

City Dance directly interacts with audience members through personal conversations and retweeting. City Dance makes these decisions in relation to using Twitter to gain credibility in the community, the trust of parents, the respect of professional dancers, and so on.

## My Research in Practice

I had the opportunity to work on the social media team for one of City Dance's events called Rep the Midwest. The daylong event was a breakdancing competition among professional dance crews from all over the United States. I was in charge of tweeting from the City Dance and the Rep the Midwest Twitter accounts throughout the day.

Because I do not have any background in break dancing, I knew that there would be a disconnect between myself and the competitors, the judges, and the audience. They were all a part of this world that I was not a part of, and therefore, I had to familiarize myself with this new community. They had their own jargon, their own values, and their own interests. I had to find out what was important to them to make sure that the tweets would be relevant and interesting from their point of view. I also had to use their language to sound credible and in-the-know. Questions that I asked included: Who are the important names to know here? What are the most difficult dance moves? Who is known to have


Figure 7: Rep the Midwest Twitter Layout

signature moves? What does the audience want to be updated about? To find the answers to these questions, I immersed myself in the culture of the event. I listened to conversations between dancers and audience members. My best resource, though, was one of my ISU public relations student colleagues who also happened to be a break dancer. He was my best bet for resourceful information because he understood the break dance culture as well as the communication practices of Twitter. When I found out the answers to these questions, I had to construct the information in an entertaining and interactive way.

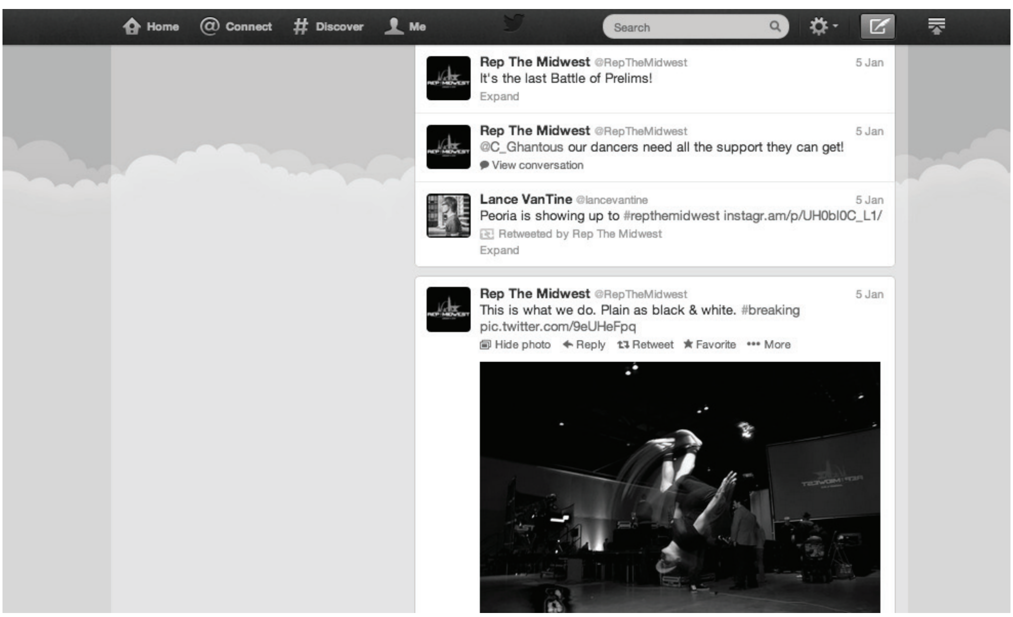


Figure 8: Rep the Midwest Sample Tweets

I worked with photographers to choose eye-catching photographs. I informed the audience on where to be within the large venue and when. I recapped winners of dance battles, and I responded to questions. This was putting my writing research into practice, for I used what I knew about this organization, Twitter as a medium, and all of the complex factors that affect writing in this context in order to tweet in the most effective way possible.

When tweeting about Rep the Midwest, reading an article linked from *The Vidette's* Twitter account, texting my friends about plans for the weekend, or walking by an advertisement on the side of a bus stop, I am a part of activity systems whether I know it or not. Communication is always affected by culture, history, and the activity system it operates within: CHAT. Every person that comes into contact with a particular communicative effort changes it from what it was before, even if just ever so slightly. The makers and writers of messages deliberately think about the trajectory of and what goes into their pieces. The audience, intended or not, is all a part of the process. To know about the processes of CHAT in writing, communication, and organizations is to be more aware of the messages happening around you and throughout the world.

Twitter may seem, from the outside, like it is one genre. In my research, I found that there are many genres within Twitter. Twitter is but one medium used by varied forces to accomplish one goal: communication. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory shows us the effects of the multiple forces that influence the purpose, content, and outcome of every layout, picture, and tweet. In order to understand the dynamics of CHAT within each Twitter account, I had to understand the depth of each organization and Twitter itself, and by doing this research, I not only learned a lot about the genre, but became a more thoughtful Tweeter.

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# Word Choice: Global Challenges in Academic Writing

Cristina Sánchez Martín

In this article, Sánchez Martín describes the decision-making process she goes through as she is writing and explores some of the challenges that both second/third language writers and first language writers face in academic discourse. In particular, she describes the lexical and grammatical difficulties the participants of her study have while writing and reaches the conclusion that all sorts of writers, no matter what their first language is, seem to deal with similar problems in their writing.

As I start writing the first draft of this article, I stop for a second and take a deep breath. I know it is not going to be a smooth process; I know I will be stuck on sentences for several reasons and that I will never be satisfied with all the decisions I make throughout all the writing process. Just like when I am playing scrabble with my English major friends, I will have to squeeze my mind and dig into all my linguistic knowledge in order to produce a creative piece of writing. What is it usually that I have to look for in the deepest corner of my mind? What are the linguistic means that are activated in doing so? What sort of skills do I develop in order to successfully achieve my purposes as a writer? And most importantly: do I go through this really complex self-reflexive process because of my personal background and my identity as an international graduate student of English, or do other people deal with similar issues? What makes native and non-native speakers[1] different in terms of their writing skills in an academic context?

Perhaps you who are now reading this introduction have already noticed something that is different about it, and therefore, there could be some chances that you might give up reading my thoughts. In that case, I am asking you for a favor. Some of you may be aware of subtleties related to cultural issues.

 

But if you are not, I hope you will be ready to activate your cross-cultural sensitivity in order to approach this article. Globalization has brought us together, and thus, intelligibility is not only in my hands, as a writer, but also in yours, as a reader. Any sort of communication exists because there are two sides that mutually collaborate in order to achieve common goals.

The aim of this article is to look at some of the challenges that both international graduate students of English and US-born students of English have to cope with in their academic writing. In particular, I will narrow the focus to challenges related to word choice. By looking at the conscious or unconscious decisions made in terms of word choice, I also aim to contribute to breaking down the barriers that separate the so-called native and non-native speakers by pointing both at similarities and differences that, once identified, can be further explored and that, ultimately, impact the quality of the writing skills of the latter.

## Choosing Lexical and Grammatical Words

In the first place, we know that words are not isolated in texts. They interconnect among other words so as to produce coherent and cohesive discourses. We know that there is cohesion in a text because we can make sense out of it thanks to words that semantically refer to other words previously mentioned. For instance, I might say, "**My sister's** name is **Pilar**. **She** has just moved to **the south of Spain**, to a **city** called **Valencia**. **There, she** works as a chemical engineer at **a company which** seeks to promote eolic energy." When we read the second sentence we know I am referring to my sister, Pilar, or "she." Although I use different linguistic items to talk about her, we know I am talking about the same person. The same thing happens to words like "the south of Spain," "Valencia," and "there"; they all refer to the same place even though I use different words in several sentences throughout the text. A text is cohesive if we know how to link sentences. In the same texts, words like "there" and "which" help us connect several sentences.

In this respect, words belong to the syntactic realm of linguistics. For example, determiners always accompany a noun; they do not carry any meaning on their own. However, when they precede a noun, they specify (determine) what noun in particular they are referring to. So, that's why the phrases "my house," "a house," "the house," and "one house" mean different things.

Moreover, words are charged with meaning that is not only denotative (what you read in a dictionary entry) but also connotative (the associations that take place in our minds in order to make sense of a word). For instance, the denotative meaning of the word "sun" according to the *Oxford Dictionary of*

*English* is "the star round which the earth orbits," but its connotative meaning will be bound to our knowledge of the world, and thus, it is culturally-specific. For example, for many people from different backgrounds, the sun conveys meanings of optimism and happiness because it provides us with light and warmth. However, there are other words whose connotative meaning will vary a lot across cultures. In this sense, who you are as a writer and who you are addressing with your text, as well as the context in which you produce it, will play a huge role when you make decisions on whether or not to use a particular word. To illustrate this idea, I can refer to the fact that I used the expression "international graduate" and not "non-native speaker" previously in this article. Although the denotative meanings of both expressions are not the same (you can be an international student and at the same time a native speaker of English), they are certainly related in this contextual writing situation. I consciously made the choice of using "international" with the purpose of avoiding the stereotypical ideas about linguistic behaviors that are commonly projected in people´s minds when referring to "non-native" speakers. In other words, I believe that "international" may be a more neutral and broader way to address the topic. In this case, word choice is at a high stake as it is fraught with cultural elements.

To sum up, words not only belong to the lexical realm of language but also to syntax and pragmatics (the actual use of language). The following diagram shows the connections between these linguistic sub-disciplines in relation to word choice.

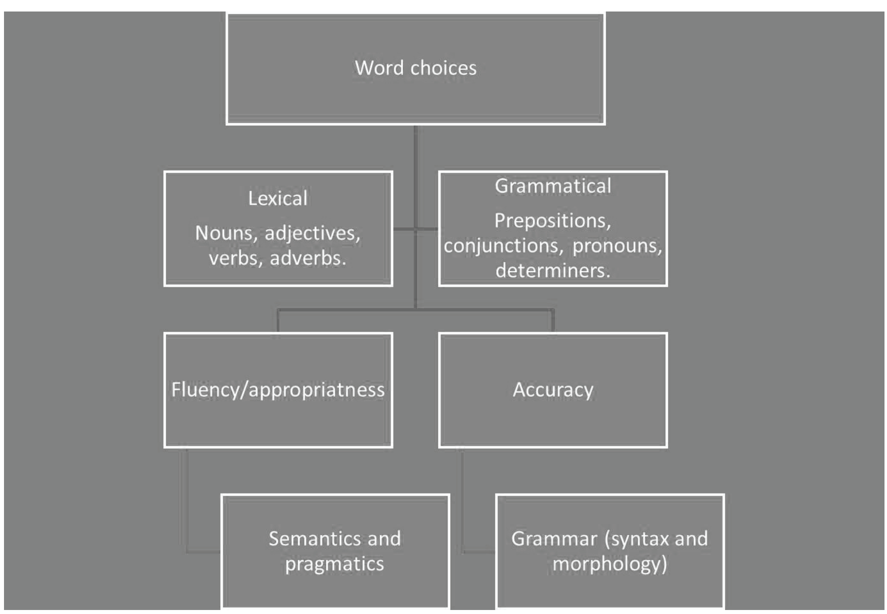


Figure 1: The Relations of Words to Disciplines

## The Study

In order to look at these challenges and to establish comparisons as far as decision making processes are concerned, I interviewed writers whose native languages differed, and I answered the questions myself. Because of space limitations, only five participants (including myself) collaborated in this project.

Four of us are PhD students of English at Illinois State University, and the other participant is doing a Masters in Modern Languages, focusing on French in particular. So we are not only familiarized with academic writing, but also we have some metalinguistic knowledge about it (knowledge on how to write, particularly about grammar rules). To put it in a simpler way, we know about writing as a linguistic and communicative activity *per se*. This may be a limitation in terms of the scope of the analysis, but it is not my aim to draw conclusions on the similarities and/or differences among us. In fact, my purpose is just to raise awareness about it and to start a discussion that may be further (and hopefully) implemented in the future.

The participants responded to my questions via the Internet. Three of them replied to a Facebook message, and one of them replied via email. Thus, the features of their writing will attach to the genre conventions of Facebook and email (for instance, Participant 1 uses a smile face to end up her answers).

Another aspect that I should mention is that there are differences in the tone that the participants use in their answers, mainly because of the predisposition by which they approached the interview. In particular, it may seem noticeable that I engage more in finding answers to the questions, which are longer and also include more examples. As I am the writer of this article, my concerns about the topic are probably higher, and thus, I have to reflect on the word choices that I am making as I write. Therefore, agency (who is writing and with what purposes) makes a difference in composition.

## My Experience

I often struggle with the spelling of certain words. It is always the same words; I think I have fossilized those "errors," and although I know I have some problems with those words, I keep on making the same mistakes. It happens with the words "especially" and "specially," "emphasize" (or "emphasise") and with the words "analysis," "analyze," and "analyses," for instance. Sometimes, this confusion is caused by the differences between British and American English.

I also have trouble finding collocations (chunks of words that always appear together like "apply for a job" or "keep an eye on someone") in English, because those types of semantic expressions are very fixed in a language. Moreover, we may have some collocations in Spanish that would perfectly fit in a sentence but that do not exist in English, and that, sometimes, is frustrating.

I constantly do research. I check all sorts of dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, dictionaries for slang expressions, online translators, American English dictionaries, British English dictionaries, Google, webpages that are both in Spanish and English, etc. One of my favorite ways to check my writing is to type a sentence or a fragment of a sentence between quotation marks on Google and see how many results I get. Besides knowing how many people have used that sentence on the Internet in more or less formal contexts (that is why I use quotation marks), I also get further information by looking at who wrote that and in what context. For instance, if I google "I often check dictionaries," there are only seven results for my search, and the first one was written by a Japanese person. In this case, I do not feel very confident with using that particular sentence (although I know is totally acceptable and grammatically correct), but I don´t see many native speakers using it (which is probably because they don´t check dictionaries very often, no offense :p). Anyways, seven results are not enough for me. So what I usually do is to change some of the words whose function and meaning do not affect the grammatical structure of the sentence. For example, in this case I google "I often check webpages". Contrary to what I expect, I just get one result. I am so disappointed and angry. I will have to keep on doing research just for a single sentence that was, apparently, super easy!

Ok, there may be some problems here. Perhaps it is that, as Google suggests, I have spelled the word "webpages" incorrectly. So I google it. Just the word, first between quotation marks and next, without quotations marks. There is probably a lot of variation in this sense, I think. Results for "web pages": 60.700.000. Ok, this means something. Results for "web pages" (no quotation marks): 1,410,000,000. Good, I don´t think 1.410.000.000 people are going to be wrong . . .

I feel so dumb (would "silly" be better? Would people use them in different ways? What would change?) for not having spelled the word right, so I check if it is something I made up or if there are some reasons for me to have spelled it like that. I google "webpages" and I get 16.100.000. Ok, now I am confused. Oh, Wikipedia says that you can spell it either way!

Alright, so I have two options: "webpages" or "web pages." Actually, there is another one. I have noticed, while doing research, that what people use most of the times is "websites". And that would be totally perfect. Why? Why? Why? I know this word, of course I do. Why was that other word ("webpages") so embedded in my mind? Well, there is a very simple explanation. In peninsular Spanish, the word that everybody uses is "página web" (I believe that "sitios web" is mostly used in Latin American countries).

This makes me think about the words “sitio web” and “página web” as the perfect examples of both code-switching and code-meshing. How interesting! (And I am using this expression here because I would have done that in Spanish, and I know people in the UK say it, although I asked an American friend of mine if people in the USA use it or not, and his concise answer was “no!”). Digressions apart, using “web page” was an example of code-meshing because I am mixing up two linguistic (cognitive) structures even though there is just one language, English. And “página web” is an example of code-switching because the expression is composed of/by (I would have to google which preposition goes with “composed”) two words from two different linguistic systems, Spanish and English. (By the way, “composed of” got 73,200,000 results and “composed by” got 23.800.000 results).

My troubles with the sentence I started doing research about (“I often check dictionaries”) are not over. How can a simple sentence cause me so much trouble? Is it because I am a linguist that I pay so much attention to these aspects?

Anyway, there is more to look at in the sentence. I still find it awkward that there were only seven results in my search for “I often check dictionaries.” What else could be the reason for the problem? The frequency adverb “often,” maybe. I still remember being taught those adverbs in school, in high-school, in the languages academy and in college. What a surprise that I still don´t feel 100% sure about the fact that there are rules when using them. Moreover, the number of results I got in Google do not show very well defined patterns of use (586,000 results for “I often check it” and 210.000 for “I check it often”). It seems to me that the first option would be a better choice. My research would continue with changing the adverb to “barely” or “usually” to see if the pattern is repeated. In fact, “I usually check it” is used 3,410,000 times, whereas “I check it usually” is only used 42.100 times. This makes me think that perhaps, I should have used “usually” instead of “often” in my sentence. They pretty much mean the same thing. So I google my sentence again “I usually check web pages,” and . . . NOOOOOOOO! Just one result again! At this point I don´t care anymore about the sentence. I google “check web pages” and I get 1.220.000 results. That´s more than enough.

However, I think, native speakers (aha!) would have probably said something else instead. I will just ask my friends on Facebook.

Great! I am done with a sentence. The process would be the same for other “problematic” aspects. I actually randomly chose that sentence, which unexpectedly made me think about things that were apparently easy for me. I guess I have done too many discourse analyses. (By the way, notice that my friend, a “native” speaker of English says “web pages” in her message. Is it because she was influenced by what she saw that I had written in my first message? If that is the case, I win!).

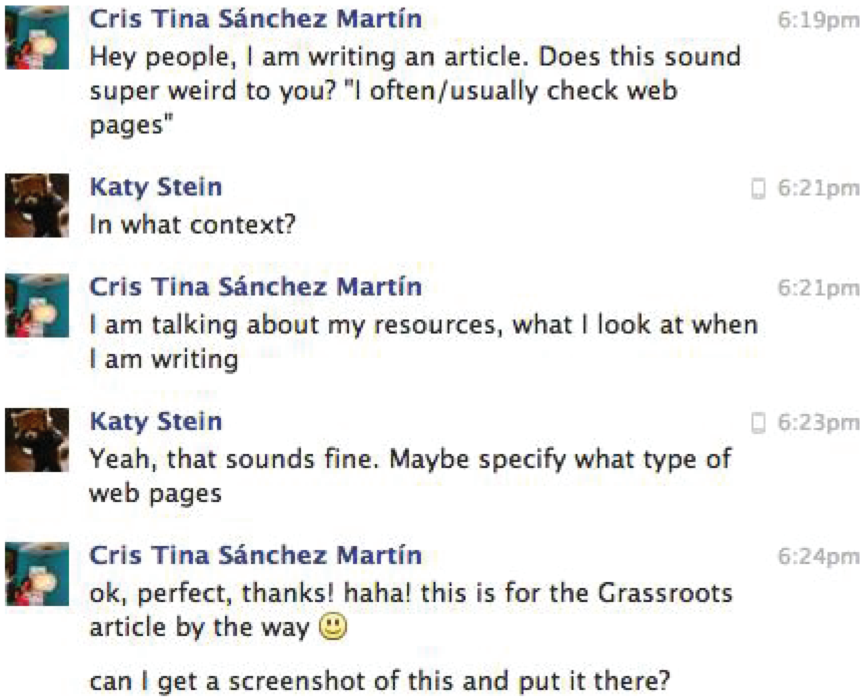


Figure 2: I Facebook My Friends To Ask Them About My Word Choices

## Do I Proof-Read My Writing?

I revise my writing all the time, not only after having finished the paper or essay. I often ask people who are around (or on Facebook) about grammatical issues or issues of appropriateness, but unless I have to submit what I have written to an official institution, such as a committee that is going to decide if I get a scholarship or can present at a conference, I do not usually ask people to read my final draft for me. Mainly because I have done so much research already that I don´t think it will make a big difference.

If someone revises it for me, I will always try to ask someone who is culturally-sensitive and ideally someone who knows Spanish, so that they can help me with semantic issues, because those are the hardest to cope with.

Apart from Google, I USUALLY look at other WEBSITES like online translators. I use a database (linguee.com) that allows me to see the context in which a particular expression is employed and that consists of a corpus compiled by official documents from European Institutions, basically. Thus, they are very reliable. The problem with it is that once I have checked that the linguistic expression was appropriately used, I have to look for an American context in which it is used, as well.

## The Participants' Responses

**Note:** To maintain accuracy of my participants' responses, I have included them directly without grammatical editing. Thus, these answers represent their exact responses, reflecting the context/situation of the interview.

1. *Do you usually have to face challenges regarding word choice in your academic articles (papers)? If yes, could you describe them with some examples? Would you say that those challenges relate more to lexical or grammatical words?*

    **Participant 1:** I think usually challenges arise when I am thinking about a thing visually in mind (like drawing a map or chart of ideas) then I get stuck when I suddenly have to verbalize it. Also sometimes [. . .] I have a hard time find that subtle counterpart in the other language too fully represent that idea. I usually go online and use either freedictionary.com and iciba.com and even urbandictionary.com to figure out what I am trying to articulate. I think most of my linguistic challenges come from attempts to use idioms.

    **Participant 2:** Yes, I often face challenges with word choice in my academic writing. Usually these challenges stem from trying to adapt my language to an academic tone. Also, sometimes academic words are so "loaded" that I might have to go back and review some readings to make sure I'm talking about the right thing in the right context. So, most of these concerns are "lexical" then.

    **Participant 3:** Yes, sometimes I do face challenges while writing my academic papers, most of them are lexical ones. In different cases, I used to think that an English word means always the same as it's morphological equivalent in French (ex.: the French word: "librairie" means "bookstore", and what we call "Library" in English is "bibliothéque" in French). Or, when constructing a sentence containing a word that I don't know, unconsciously I use the French equivalent of it at the start and before I write it I pay attention to the fact that the word I'm using in the sentence is not English but French (ex.: Using the word "connaissance" for "acquaintance").

    **Participant 4:** Yes, problems regarding word choice are often present as I write academic papers. I would have to say that these problems stem from my limited vocabulary. My papers typically become pedantic and repetitive without the use of a Thesaurus. It might be embarrassing for an English major to admit, but that is my primary challenge regarding word choice within my own academic writing. I even had to use a thesaurus to answer these questions. Embarrassing, I know.

2. *How do you solve these challenges? Do you use any sources (bilingual/monolingual/ online dictionaries, other websites...etc.)? Do you proof-read your papers?*

**Participant 1:** I definitely proofread my paper but I make the same mistakes any other person would make. Usually typos, missing words or things like that. Mostly caused by my mind moving on faster than my fingers can type and thus I end up leaving out some of the words :)

**Participant 2:** I solve those lexical challenges by referring to readings that might elucidate the concept for me. In case I don't want to deal with that, I'll usually consult Wikipedia (and then Wikipedia's sources) to get some information. As far as proofreading goes, I must confess that I am horrible at that step. Reading my own writing is rarely helpful—I can't see any of my own mistakes. Sometimes I use the old proofreader's trick and read backwards, but this doesn't always help me. To really effectively proofread I'll need to leave the work alone for at least a week and then come back to it. The most effective method is, of course, having someone else read it for me.

**Participant 3:** To solve this kind of problems, I search on Google and choose sites that are often efficient like Reverso. However, I always start with Google Translate, because when I type the Arabic or French equivalent of the word I'm looking for in English, Google Translate offers a variety of different meanings and different words [ . . . ]. When I choose the most accurate word, I first test it by inverting languages on the language bars to choose this time English as the source language and French then Arabic as the target language, and see if I'm satisfied with the different meaning of the English word [ . . . ]. I do proofread my papers more than once: after finishing each paragraph I read it again before moving on, and when I'm done writing I read the whole paper.

**Participant 4:** As I am writing I am also constantly checking a thesaurus in order to avoid repetition. The thesaurus that is coupled with Microsoft Word is typically extensive enough to fulfill my shameful vocabulary problem [ . . . ]. What I must always consider is my personal writing voice. I may utilize a thesaurus in order to expand the vocabulary of my work, but I must be careful not to deviate from my established writing voice. For example, I have to avoid dropping scholarly language in the middle of a more informal piece. During my proof-reading process is when I typically locate places in which I have been repetitive in my word choice. It is then I begin replacing words and phrases with the help of a thesaurus. But, because my writing style is somewhat unique in the fact that I write in spurts (short but quick regurgitation of ideas often interspersed by small breaks that give me time to think about what to write next, while also re-reading what I have already written), I am constantly proof-reading my work as I write.

## Interpreting the Results

All writers have to face challenges related to word choice, and thus, they all go through some sort of research process. So there is consistency, in this sense. However, the participants in this study face diverse challenges, and as a consequence, they have to sort them out in different ways.

Participants 1 and 3, as well as myself, stated that one of the difficulties that they (we) encounter as writers relates to idioms and collocations. This is due to the fact that their (our) first language is not English. Sometimes, these participants have to deal with the linguistic phenomena of code-switching and code-meshing. Moreover, as far as grammatical aspects are concerned, they feel much more insecure about accuracy issues than native speakers. The question here is to ask ourselves to what extent a preposition or the use of determiners, for instance, affect the intelligibility of the text.

However, in terms of appropriateness, it seems like all the participants had similar attitudes towards how to decide whether or not to use a word. For Participant 4, looking for synonyms is always a task that goes along with the writing process. Participant 2 also affirms that the tone of the writing piece can also be problematic and that "loaded" words, those whose meaning can have several connotations provoke challenges, as well.

Spelling issues also affect most of the participants no matter what their first language is. Participant 1, for instance, when asked about how to solve the challenges, focuses on the reason that caused those challenges/problems and says that because she thinks faster than she writes, she makes spelling mistakes "like everyone else."

Other challenges related to word choice are the tone and the semantic load of the words or expressions used, as Participant 3 states. For Participant 4, using a wide range of lexical items becomes a writing challenge, as well.

The different issues that participants have to face in writing determine the extent of the research process that each participant goes through. The exhaustiveness with which a participant carries out his/her research process directly relates to their personal background, in particular to their field of expertise, but it is mainly related to their involvement in the writing situation. In this sense, the amount of time and effort that a writer will put on his/her work would depend on factors such as the purposes of the piece of writing and especially on the audience. Moreover, as Participant 4 and myself explained, doing a lot of research while writing means that the proof-reading part of the process is going to be less important than for those writers who do not do so much research before finishing the first completed draft of what they are writing. However, in my case, having someone proof-reading my writing is essential if I am submitting the piece I wrote to an institution or to someone who has to assess the quality of my writing. In that sense, the contextual situation will determine how far the research process goes, but the audience is the factor that will promote a more or less detailed revision process.

As Participant 2 said, "Maybe for the purposes of academic writing, I am technically 'non-native' like everyone else." One of the most important factors that determines the degree of writers´ confidence is the audience. Although as I stated in the introduction of this article, I think I will never be 100% satisfied with my writing, and probably the participants in this study won´t either, being aware of the readers´ allowances is a major concern for any writer. In other words, knowing that the readers´ attitudes towards the text are not going to become personal before, while, and after dealing with a text is a vital element that influences how we, writers, approach our tasks. From my personal experience, predicting the readers´ reactions to my (multicultural) text is one of the most important steps in the writing process. Thus, I truly believe that because I do so much research to fulfill the readers´ expectations, to the point that the boundaries between grammatical correctness and real language use are so fuzzy they do not seem to exist, sometimes it is up to you, reader, to be more or less tolerant towards writers and to invest more or less energy in approaching intelligibility from a more inclusive or narrower perspective.

**Note:** Perhaps you have noticed some discrepancies within my article, such as typography in numbers. After having revised my first draft, I realized that several issues related to my cultural background were still present in the text. However, I decided to ignore them and use these discrepancies in order to illustrate how my writing can adapt to different codes and, at the same time, keep it intelligible.

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## Endnotes

[1] The native/non-native dichotomy has been revisited by Brutt-Griffler, Janina, and Keiko K. Samimy (among others) in "Transcending the nativeness paradigm." *World Englishes* 20.1 (2001): 99-106.

**Cristina Sánchez-Martín** is a PhD student of English at Illinois State University. She has been learning several languages throughout most of her life, and she has also been in contact with peoples from different cultures. Therefore, she believes in the power of linguistic interactions to mediate among people, and most importantly, she thinks that challenging widespread linguistic misconceptions is the first step to promote equal relationships among languages and cultures.

# Office Talk: Exploring Jargon in the Workplace

Beth Chandler

In this article, Chandler looks at the use of jargon in the workplace. Through research and personal experience, she defines jargon and explores how it's used in work environments. She then examines the trajectory of jargon as it travels through the activity system of the workplace and makes its way into different genres.

It's Monday morning, and our team is sitting around the conference table in my boss's office.

"Come on, guys, this is one of our core competencies," my boss is saying into the speakerphone. "I know this project has a lot of moving parts, but we really need to think outside the box and leverage our strengths. Beth, can you reach out to Steve? We really need his buy-in on this. I'm out of pocket the rest of the day, but let's circle back tomorrow morning so we can hit the ground running. Thanks, guys, we'll talk offline later," he says and hangs up the phone.

Aughh, jargon strikes in the workplace once again! So far this morning, I've counted 11 instances, and it's only 9:30. At times like this, I feel like a character in the movie *Office Space*. Come to think of it, my boss kind of looks like Bill Lumbergh. I'm going to need more coffee to drown out all this jargon.

## Defining Jargon

Jargon is defined as specialized language used for a particular activity by a specific group of people (Merriam-Webster.com). If you've ever watched

*Grey's Anatomy*, you know that specialized language can come in handy in workplaces like Seattle Grace Hospital. Dr. Shepherd doesn't have time to stand around giving Meredith and her fellow interns lengthy instructions when there's an emergency. He needs specialized language he can use to communicate effectively and efficiently so they can save lives.

But when we think of jargon, we tend to think of it in negative terms. American Heritage Dictionary defines jargon as "the specialized language of a trade, profession, or similar group, especially when viewed as difficult to understand by outsiders," while Urban Dictionary describes it as "speech or writing having unusual or pretentious vocabulary, convoluted phrasing, and vague meaning." When I google "jargon," I find several articles on "the most annoying jargon" or "the jargon we wish would go away." Terms like "core competency," "buy-in," "going forward," and "drill down" top the lists of the most annoying examples of business jargon.

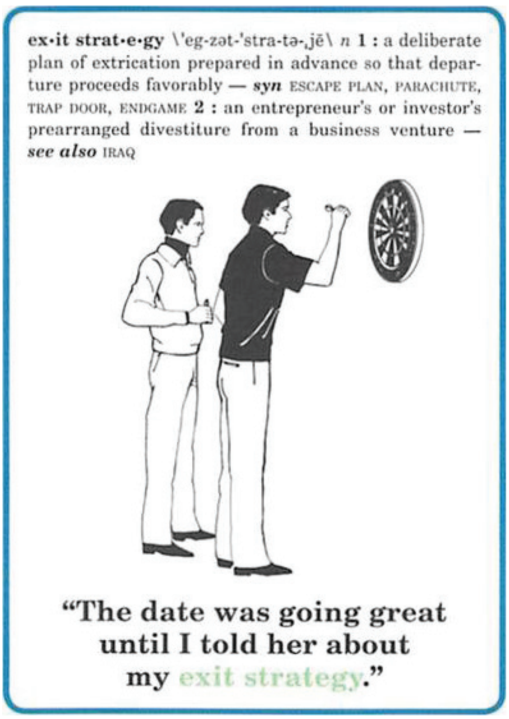


Figure 1: Corporate Flashcards (KnockKnock.com)

There is even a set of "Corporate Flashcards" promising to help "Speak suit in mere days!" Each card has a term like "multi-task" or "value proposition" on one side with a definition and funny illustration on the other side. The "Exit Strategy" card defines the term as "a deliberate plan of extrication prepared in advance so that departure proceeds favorably" and has a picture of two guys in bell-bottoms playing darts. One guy says to the other, "the date was going great until I told her about my exit strategy" (KnockKnockStuff.com). While I find these cards funny, they certainly don't portray jargon in a very positive manner.

## Why People Hate Jargon

To get a better sense of the jargon people use, I started keeping a list on my phone (Figure 2). When I heard someone use a "jargony" word or phrase at work, at school, or in the news, I added it to my list. Friends and family helped by texting me words they heard too. Within a couple weeks, I had about 40 terms on my list, ranging from "bring to the table" to "on my radar" to "get on board." Through my research, I came across probably 200 more, including "open the kimono," "all hands on deck," and "circle the wagons." The use of jargon was prevalent in all sorts of settings.

If jargon is so common in our language, then what's wrong with using it? The problem with using jargon in our speech or writing is that it can be ineffective because many of the terms are too vague to convey meaning. For example, what exactly does it mean to "reach out" to a co-worker? To call them? Email them? Talk to them in person? In my opening example, I'd chosen to call Steve because I felt I could explain the details of my project better over the phone than in an email, but afterward, I learned that my boss had wanted me to email Steve so we'd have a record of his "buy-in."

Figure 2: The Author's List of Jargon

For another project at work, I was asked to write a news release to announce a new committee and the work its members would be doing. When I interviewed the head of the committee, she excitedly explained to me they were "thinking outside the box" and "working toward a paradigm shift." Either she didn't yet know or understand the goals of the committee, or she wasn't effective at communicating them. Either way, her words were too vague and didn't provide any meaning about the committee I could use in a news release. "Jargon masks real meaning," says Jennifer Chatman, a professor at the University of California-Berkeley's Haas School of Business. "People use it as a substitute for thinking hard and clearly about their goals and the direction that they want to give others" (Mallet, Nelson, and Steiner).

While jargon is ineffective because it doesn't contain meaning, specialized language, like what Dr. Shepherd might use, is effective because it has very specific meaning. Medical terminology has been defined for a specific purpose within a specific activity system like the Emergency Room. The medical professionals using this language have learned the terms and agreed to their meaning. They know the difference between an *ischemic* stroke and a *hemorrhagic* stroke, and they know how to treat a patient with one or the other. These terms are effective in this situation because they have specific meaning for the audiences who use them.

On the other hand, the jargon that's often used in offices can be ineffective because it's too vague to contain any meaning for the audiences who use it or for the audiences they may be communicating with. While specialized language used in the ER can lead medical professionals to take action, jargon doesn't lead people to take action if the words don't have any meaning, or that meaning isn't clear to the people using and hearing the jargon.

Audience is one of the most important factors to consider when writing in any genre. Understanding our audiences becomes even more important as our world, even right here in Central Illinois, becomes a more global society. Thanks to new technologies in travel and communication, our world has become much smaller, and traditional boundaries of nations, cultures, races, and ethnicities are being broken down (Stanford Friedman 261).

Today, we find ourselves communicating with people from all different cultures, languages, and backgrounds, whether it's in the workplace, in class, or online. When we communicate, we have to think about whether our audience understands the words and phrases we use and sometimes take for granted. For example, did my co-worker in Amsterdam, whose native language is Dutch, understand what our boss meant when he instructed us to get "buy-in?"

## The Trajectory of Jargon

To track these kinds of ideas, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides a framework for helping us better understand the complexity of different genres, writing situations, languages, and cultures. Applying aspects of CHAT, such as how texts are produced, received, and distributed, can help us understand more about our text and the culture and activity of the field in which it was created (Walker).

I've always been amazed by the trajectory, or path, of jargon and how quickly it can spread through the workplace. I might hear my boss use a new term like "level-set" for the first time during our morning meeting (as in "we need to level-set everyone's expectations") and by my third cup of coffee, I've heard five more people use it. Where did "level-set" come from and why is everyone in the office suddenly using it?

The process of adding a new word to the English language used to be a fairly lengthy one, taking two to three years, according to the folks at Oxford Dictionary. Dictionary writers, or lexicographers, added the words they thought were most useful, even if no one was actually using those words.

Today, this process happens much faster, thanks to the Internet. Because of the Web, new words catch on faster with wider audiences in a shorter period of time, and people expect to see high-profile new words like "selfie" in the dictionary. Dictionary writers are continually tracking the use of new words in both print and online sources to determine whether the word is a candidate for being added to the English language. They select the ones that are the most important and significant and that are most likely to stand the test of time (OxfordDictionary.com). For example, new words that made Oxford's cut in 2013 include "phablet" (larger than a smart phone but smaller than a tablet), "srsly" (short for seriously, srsly?) and "digital detox" (something we could probably all use).

Technology in the workplace has sped up jargon's trajectory. In a short period of time, jargon can travel from one instance to multiple genres in various formats for audiences around the world. When thinking about the trajectory of jargon in the workplace, my experience is that it works something like this:

1. An employee comes up with a new term like "game changer" and uses it in a conference presentation to explain an important business concept.
2. Employees from companies all over the world attend the conference, either in-person or online. They note the presenter's use of the new term "game changer" in describing the concept.
3. The employees go back to their companies and use the word "game changer" in meetings with their employees.
4. Those employees use "game changer" with their employees and so on.

These communications might happen face-to-face during a meeting in Chicago, in an email exchange with someone at the headquarters in New York, or on a conference call with employees in London. Employees throughout the company adopt these phrases in order to become a part of the workplace culture. Soon, employees are using "game changer" in all kinds of writing genres used throughout the company—the website, the CEO's tweets, the president's quote in a news release, a new product brochure and the annual report. The problem is that because the term is so vague in describing the concept, it doesn't convey meaning to the company's audiences.

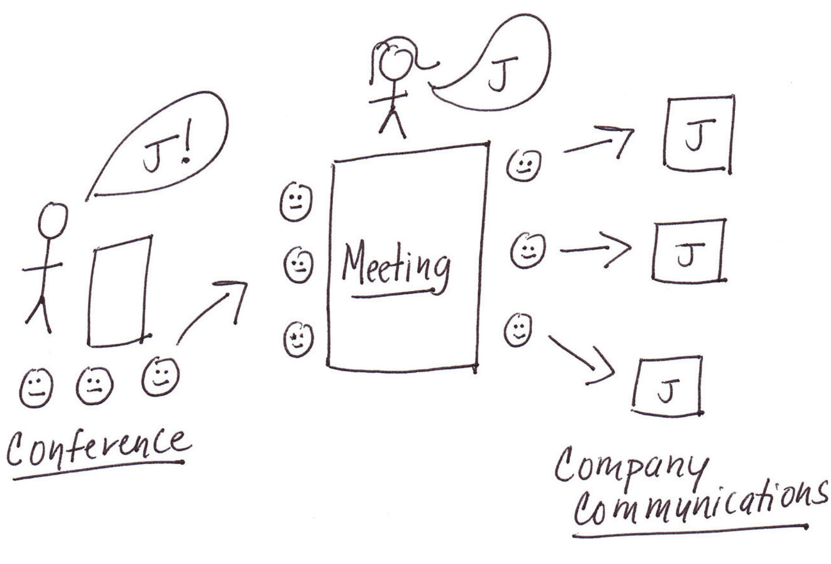


Figure 3: The Author Doodles on the Trajectory of Jargon in the Workplace

## Key Takeaway

Most of us hear jargon used every day—at school, on the job, in the news. Because we're exposed to jargon on a regular basis, we may find ourselves using it. The next thing we know, it sneaks its way into our writing. This happened to me recently, and I cringed when I found myself using the phrase "think outside the box" in a writing assignment.

So, what can we do to make sure jargon doesn't get into our writing or that when it does, we are using it purposefully to create more meaning, not less? This is a complicated question, and there are no easy answers.

But going forward, I think we should work to sunset jargon and avoid this low-hanging fruit. When it comes to choosing words, we need to focus like a laser beam. Our next steps are to be proactive and drill down to choose value-added words that communicate clearly and meaningfully to our stakeholders. As we work toward this paradigm shift in our writing, it will become a best practice for all of us.

Do I have everyone's buy-in? Be sure to keep me in the loop on this. I have an open-door policy.

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# Changing Professions, Identities and Writing: Will the Real Writer Please Stand Up?

Amanda K. Rinehart

Different professions require the ability to write in different genres. When Amanda Rinehart switched careers, she had to learn new writing genres as a part of changing her professional identity. Because her profession is important to her and part of who she is, she's been working hard at it. Combining her two professional identities when she writes is even harder because it involves two different versions of who she is. Learning new writing genres is a lifelong endeavor, requiring a lot of writing research, some introspection, and positive relationships with colleagues.

*"Professional identity results from a developmental process that facilitates a growing understanding of self in one's chosen field, enabling one to articulate her or his role to others within and outside of the discipline" (Healey & Hays, p. 1).*

I remember exactly when I learned to write as a scientist. It was a biology class in 1993, where we all received a one-page handout on writing a science article explaining the science-article-formula: decoded, condensed, and simplified. It was great! No talent or finesse required. The article didn't have to read well; it just had to include the basics in the right places. In the immortal words of Joe Friday, "All we want are the facts, ma'am." I loved it! For the first time, I understood what I was supposed to include, where I was supposed to put it, and what to leave out. All those red-marked English papers were a thing of the past. For the next fifteen years, this genre was the essence of my professional writing.

When I write as a scientist, a paramount concern is to be clear and concise. Because scientists pay a page fee to publish their work, it needs to be short and to the point. So even though my audience is other scientists like me, who might appreciate the odd piece of imagery, sparseness is of higher value. I do not write how tiny worms on a warming microscope slide undulate uselessly in their last dance with mortality. I write that when exposed to heat, the movement of the specimen will cease. There are to be no value-laden descriptions and preferably no descriptions that are not absolutely essential. Scientists want to know the crux of the piece immediately. Hence the formula—it makes it easy for scientists to get to the information they want to know. In fact, reading a science article is totally nonlinear. Science articles are written in the following order: title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, and conclusions. On the other hand, science articles are read in this order: title, abstract, *conclusions, results, methods* . . . and then maaaaybe the introduction. After my student days, I rarely read an entire article, and I certainly never read them linearly.

My knowledge of the science article genre worked great for my first career, but then I changed professions. I became a librarian. It happened rather accidentally. Our research facility had a library, but no librarian. All of our requests for journal articles went to the National Agricultural Library. However, when the National Agricultural Library had to raise its prices, and money got tight, it was suddenly important for us to know if we had the same articles downstairs for free. Since I had worked in a library shelving books as an undergraduate student, I was deemed the most qualified to rehabilitate the library. It took me a year to clear the Mardi Gras beads and broken computer monitors out and get the books and journals lined up on the shelves. But my colleagues were still having trouble finding the information. They didn't want to paw through filing cabinets or walk up and down the shelves. They wanted to be able to search electronically and know that something was there before they went to find it. At that point, I realized that I was in over my head. If I digitized the fifteen drawers of articles, would I be violating copyright law? How could I make a whole series of journals electronically searchable without scanning every word? For that matter, how could I just get the books listed in a database without having to re-type all the citation information? So I signed up for a cataloging class. And then an information organization class. Before I knew it, I had a Master's in Information and Library Science and a new job market with great prospects.

I can't say that my writing was the first consideration in my decision to change professions, but it quickly became apparent that I would need to learn about new genres of writing. The science-article-formula would no longer suffice. I found learning to write in new genres particularly difficult, and I had to ask myself why I was having so much trouble learning to write differently. A colleague of mine, a computer-coding graphic artist, described it best. She explained that when she finished coding HTML5, she would get up and physically walk around her chair, then sit back down in her artist persona. The act of walking around the chair facilitated the mental switch from programmer to artist. She noted that the new generation of computer artists may not have to walk around their chairs to make the transition, because they never learned that artists are not programmers, and vice versa. Even though I am neither programmer nor artist, I can totally relate to this scenario. As a scientist I write one way—the way I was taught in 1993. As a librarian I write another way, a way that I'm still learning as I acculturate into the profession. It's not just about what is culturally acceptable or writing for a different audience—it's about who I am when I write. I had to define my professional identities and then relinquish the scientist-identity in order to learn to write like a librarian.

As I develop my librarian professional identity, I am exploring more genres used by librarians. It might be because I'm new at it, but as a librarian I write more slowly, more thoughtfully, pulling more ideas together, struggling to articulate the ephemeral and individual processes of how humans interact with information. Unlike my science writing, I can no longer rely on the methods section having been dictated by logistics, or the results merely being a report of what happened. I now have to consider the multiple meanings of each word and the impact of a negatively constructed sentence. The hardest thing for me is that when I start writing as a librarian, I never know exactly what my main points are, whereas I always knew what the conclusion was before I wrote a science paper—the data had whispered it to me before I ever set a word to paper. I have to ask myself: am I really synthesizing ideas in a new way? Have I considered all the subtle consequences of phrasing? Am I really getting my point across? I sure haven't seen any librarian genres reduced to one page.

Also, I have a lot more freedom as a librarian than I did as a scientist. There are many more accepted writing "formulas" or genres in the world of the librarian. These include case studies, viewpoints, and conceptual papers. There are in-depth evaluations of books, websites, musical productions, and movies. My opportunities have opened up, allowing me to be a critic, a storyteller, a theorist, and a muser. Each genre has its own formula components. For example, a case study is just the story of a particular idea or program at my institution. It might include a how-to section and definitely a justification for doing it again, perhaps at other institutions. My favorite part of a case study is the 'lessons learned' section, where I get to list all the stuff that didn't work. A viewpoint is simply an editorial, whatever I feel and think about a particular topic as long as I think others would be interested. A book review might be as simple as a paragraph about how the book in question could benefit an academic library. Or it could be several pages of in-depth analysis, including comparisons to similar titles and audience suitability. It's much more freeing to write in all these different types of genres, but it also makes me more nervous, because I have to expend extra effort to learn each new genre.

Before I make a commitment to write a piece, I research the genre, read examples, and talk to others who write in this way. I have never consciously thought of this as writing research, but that's what it is—the research I need to do before I even sit down to type. I note what common themes I find and what varies widely between examples. I search the literature, both to learn more and to note where there are gaps in the discussion. I consider my audience: other academic librarians, professors in general, scientists, or avid readers of all types? I have to decode the formula for each new writing genre, but once I start to see the components and how they fit together, I can begin structuring the piece with confidence.

I also frequently rely on colleagues for my writing, both as co-authors and as informal editors. If I don't feel confident writing a section of a paper, I might ask a colleague who has that specialized knowledge. Often, my librarian pieces are rather organic in growth and only kept in check by hard deadlines and clear communication with co-authors. For me, part of learning a new writing genre is to get to know those who already write in that genre. I am fortunate to have great colleagues who are willing to take the time to read my writing and provide me constructive feedback.

I also rely on feedback from my colleagues because my writing is complicated by the type of librarian that I have chosen to be. I am a Data Librarian, a relatively new type of librarianship and one that isn't well defined. Most of my writings are for my colleagues, and most of them work with books, whether digital or in print. It is my struggle to articulate my role that contributes to my struggle to write. I have to be careful—I am both novice and experienced, qualified yet unknown and strange. I need to balance my deep respect for those with years in the profession with my enthusiasm and love of the new possibilities of organizing and sharing data. I try to draw analogies, to give everyone a common storyline, and then weave in the new concepts in ways that make sense.

Although I haven't convinced any neuroscientists to put me in a fMRI to watch how my brain works when writing, I'm pretty sure that when I write as a scientist it uses another part of my brain than when I write as a librarian. They are different representations of "me," not only in style but also in perspective and professional loyalties. Occasionally I'm inspired to write a cross-over piece, where I am both identities at once, but it's rare and difficult. I have to really feel strongly about the issue and feel that I have a unique and important perspective to communicate.

For instance, writing this piece was challenging, because it's both a crossover piece and deals with a pretty personal topic. The topic, my writing and how it relates to my career choices, is more private than discussing a theory or concept. I read other articles in *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* and even some articles on professional identities. I mentioned my dissatisfaction in feeling that I had accurately represented both of my professional identities to a colleague. She suggested that I try writing the piece first as the scientist and then as librarian, and then see how they differed. In the end, the commonalities rose to the top. The lesson I have learned when writing about something very close to your heart is to work with many editors and colleagues. They have a better perspective on what is useful to others because they are distanced from the topic.

I like to think that one day my publication record will read as one continuous lifetime of exploration, but the reality is that it will likely read like someone with split personalities. Which writer is the real me? It depends, really. Like my computer graphics artist colleague, I hope that future scientist-librarians (or librarian-scientists?) won't have the same difficulties, but I expect that all writers will face learning new writing genres at some point in time. When they do, they will have to do writing research, rely on colleagues for feedback, and maybe even explore their own professional identities too.

## Acknowledgments

In writing this piece, I was reminded yet again of the incredible educators at Kenyon College. While I can't acknowledge them all by name, I have to tip my hat to Drs. Pat and Ray Heithaus and Dr. Perry Lentz.

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

Kylie Wojciechowski

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:**<br>**1. the symbolic environment, metaphors, the study of symbols, and human behavior in culture**<br>**2. cases of language misuse**<br>**3. instructional schemata for instructors**<br>**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 |
|---|---|
| • "Science and Values" by Edward Thorndike<br>• "General Semantics and Modern Art" by Oliver Bloodstein<br>• "Etcetera" by e. e. cummings<br>• "You Can't Write Writing" by Wendell Johnson<br>• "General Semantics and Psychoanalysis" by Chas. I. Glicksberg<br>• "Chemical Semantics" by S. Weiner<br>• "Changing Food Habits" by Margaret Mead<br>• "The Brotherhood of Doctrines (1922)" by Alfred Korzybski<br>• Plus Reviews, News, and Miscellany. | • "General Semantics, Science, and Medicine: A Quality Approach" by Richard Fiordo<br>• "Who's the Mother" by Bill Haase<br>• "Indexing the Religious Beliefs of America's Founders" by Martin H. Levinson<br>• "Fascism as a Semantic Void into the Meta-Narrative of Rational Modernity" by Alessandro Saluppo<br>• Two Poems: "Foreclosure" and "Good Grief" by Peter E. Murphy<br>• "One God" by Ed Tywoniak and Frances Tywoniak<br>• "Objectivity--Does It Exist?" by Mark S. Tucker<br>• "Advanced Thinking: Mathematics, General Semantics ... Ways to Improve Relationships" by Milton Dawes<br>• "Formal Cause, Poiesis, Rhetoric: A Dialogue" by Eric McLuhan and Peter Zhang<br>• "Bindings and Becomings: Korzybski, Deleuze, and Ecological Thinking" by Peter Zhang and Eric Jenkins<br>• Metaphors in Action:"Two Generation Gaps" by Raymond Gozzi, Jr.<br>• Probes:"Philosophy How?" by Peter Zhang<br>• 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.

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# Genres that Suck! Why is Dracula in a Commercial Selling Car Insurance, Anyway?

Michelle C. Wright

After seeing Dracula in a commercial, Wright is prompted into writer-researcher action. Exploring how and why vampires are so prevalent in so many genres, Wright probes deep into genre studies and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory for answers. As her research questions and methods evolve, Wright questions if genres that take up vampires become antecedent genres for other activity systems and finds solutions in mapping how vampires took shape as a trope in folklore told over centuries. Readers won't need a wooden stake or a clove of garlic to tackle this article–not with trusty theories like genre studies and CHAT by their side.

## The Inspiration: Dracula at a Blood Drive

Do I like vampires? Okay, sure. Here and there, I have taken up quite a few vampire movies, shows, books, stories and was even kissed by a vampire once. My boyfriend and I were at a costume party; he was Dracula, and I was a gypsy/zombie/witch with fangs. Let it be said, I have a fondness for dark and kooky things. But am I a vampire expert? The answer is "no."

Yet last week while I was watching TV, a GEICO Insurance commercial caught my attention.[1] The scene takes place at a blood drive in a cafeteria, where a guy about to donate blood is being asked medical questions by someone with a clipboard, off-camera. The guy gets nervous, and the camera pans out on the man with the clipboard in front of him. This man has the characteristics of what you could call a *conventional vampire*: pale complexion, slicked-back black hair, long yellow nails—and large fangs.

Yep, the person drawing this poor guy's blood is a vampire. The vampire excitedly tosses the clipboard and says, "Let's get started, shall we?"

 

Right then, banjo music plays, the camera pans farther out, and two GEICO spokesmen are in the cafeteria. Ronnie, the banjo player, asks, "Jimmy, how happy are folks who save hundreds of dollars switching to GEICO?"

"'Happier than Dracula volunteering at a blood drive." Jimmy delivers the punch line.

"We have cookies!" Dracula giddily announces in the background.

"Get happy. Get GEICO."

Ha Ha. The commercial is slightly funny and, yeah, cheesy. It follows the format of all the other "Happier Than" GEICO commercials, a convention we've come to recognize and laugh at because of it. And while it did help me to remember my car insurance (I forgot to pay my bill), it also made me think about something else we've come to know—vampires—and how these bloodsuckers can appear just about anywhere.

## Initial Questions: Vampires in My Cereal Bowl, Too?

It's pretty common knowledge that vampire stories are a category of fiction. Look for a vampire TV show, movie, or novel at the store or online, and you will find that they often have their own section. So vampires are common enough that they are used to organize fiction genres. However, knowing this does not explain why they are so prevalent and how they show up in other genres, such as a commercial. Why is Dracula at a blood drive selling car insurance anyway? How did he get there? Is he Dracula, really?

I mean, of course, it is an actor working for GEICO's advertisement agency, playing the part of a vampire that other actors in the commercial refer to as "Dracula," which makes me think that commercials aren't any different than other works of fiction. But then again, how can that be true? A vampire commercial is not the same as a vampire television show, vampire movie, or vampire novel. Each of these is a different type of writing situation (a different genre) that has different characteristics, formats, conventions, purposes, and contexts. No doubt, the methods and tools needed to produce a vampire commercial are different from the methods and tools needed to produce a vampire novel. So how can we come to understand the multitude of vampires out there? Their other forms? Their uses? Are vampires just that sexy?

Using Google, I began to research other vampire forms and found a black and white picture of a vampire that looked more like an evil version of Disney's *Shrek* placed alongside a photo of a pale-faced, yet seductively-posed Robert Pattinson, the star of the *Twilight* films. Googling various terms—such as vampire forms, vampire characters, vampire creations, vampire products, old vampires, and modern vampires—revealed millions of vampire artifacts, a few of which are included in Figure 1. While I am not a fan of *Count Chocula* cereal (*Boo Berry* is more my style), it comes in a vampire cereal box of mini chocolaty bats and marshmallows. And how could I forget the one and only Count von Count, the mathematical-crazed vampire Muppet on *Sesame Street*. He was the love of my life. Okay, I was only four.

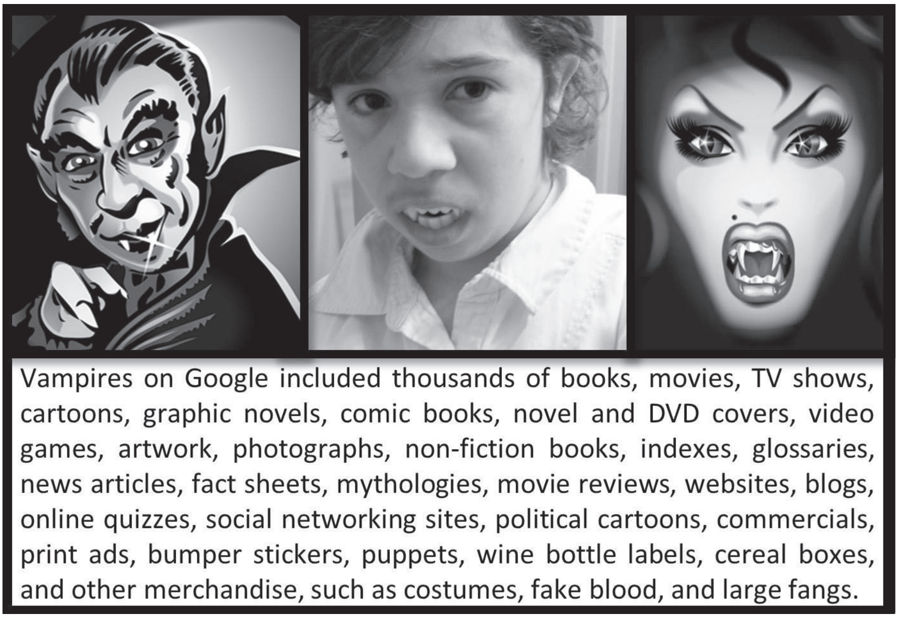


Figure 1: So Many Vampire Forms Spread Over So Many Genres (Microsoft, NVTOfficeClips.com.)

Searching the internet made me realize two things: one, our notion of a vampire consists of a web of vampire forms spread over different genres and historical periods that are never the same each time we encounter them; and two, genre is not simply a category or a way to organize types of writing. Genre has to be something more: something specific and complex.

## Go for the Genre Jugular: Exposing the Actions of Writing

In class, I learned that a genre is "a dynamic social activity," and while I understood the general idea, my research showed me that I needed more concrete terms. In *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff write, "Genres are understood as forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations. This view recognizes genres as both organizing and generating kinds of texts and social actions, in complex dynamic relation to one another" (4). Breaking down this complex quote, I notice that the use of "texts" seems to refer to any kind of compositional product, be it a novel, website, commercial, or political cartoon, which certainly works for this investigation. Vampires are in many texts.

Coming to know genre "as both organizing and generating kinds of texts" (4), I realize that genre is not only a text, but also influences the actions that go into creating it. Theorist Charles Bazerman refers to genres as "mental landscapes" and "tools of cognition" (290), and it is no wonder. Genre is how we make sense of composition, including not only the product, but also the methods (conceptualizations, strategies, practices, etc.) of composing. How a writer produces a genre is affected by what is usually done in that genre. In short, genre directs the routine actions of any particular composition.

Here, while referring back to my notes that "genre is dynamic social activity," I feel a bit confused. How can genre be routine actions and changing at the same time? Right as I was about to define genre as "a pain in the neck," new understanding hits me. Just because genre directs routine actions does not mean that those routine actions are always rigid. Certainly, a genre could be more flexible or more rigid depending on the standard practices of that genre, which makes sense because people are doing it. And regardless how similar two people may be, what they produce would not be identical, unless of course the genre (like a national weather advisory) requires the text to be rigid. So it is true; genre is stable and also dynamic at the same time.

At this point, I wonder if this is how genres take up these vampire forms and move them from place to place, sometimes altering them drastically, and other times not so much. I consider all the genres that use vampires. Do these genres share a similar characteristic that not only invites, but also requires, innovation and creativity, which then would allow for both routine and dynamic use of vampires? Does this particular sort of genre characteristic have a name?

Thinking about a lesson in a past English class, I recall how fictional devices that are repeatedly used by writers are called tropes. Looking up "trope" in *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, I find that my memory is correct. A trope is "a word, phrase, or image used in a new and different way in order to create an artistic effect . . . a common or overused theme or device : cliché <the usual horror movie *tropes*>" ("Trope"). So vampires and the things we've come to associate with them, such as preying on the blood of the living, are artistic effects—tropes—that people use while composing genres, particularly in genres that allow for or require such effects. And because artistic effects can vary as much as people, I wonder how we still can recognize vampires at all. In other words, what is it about a genre that allows for vampire tropes to be not only recognizable, but also overused to the point of being cliché?

## I've Come to Suck Your Antecedent: Wait, What the Heck's an Antecedent?

Reflecting further on genre's definition, I focus on genre as "organizing and generating kinds of texts and social actions" (Bawarshi and Reiff 4). Here, I feel that I'm onto something that I can really bite into. In order to compose any particular genre, there are certain methods, practices, tools, which become a standard way of doing it over time. These standard ways or conventions are how an individual thinks of the genre and also how the individual continues to create it, which makes me question. So is this the same as saying familiar genres can become so ingrained in our thoughts and actions that they can show up, unannounced, anytime? For example, I remember back in high school when I tried to compose my first short story, "The Laugh Toxin." The finished text looked and sounded more like a five-paragraph essay than fiction. I didn't intend for my short story to become essay-like. It just sort of happened. Why?

In "Transferability and Genres," scholar Amy Devitt gives a reason. Devitt says that "writers use the genres they know when faced with a genre they do not know" (222). This was absolutely true. At the time, I did not technically know how to write a short story. Although I was familiar with the short story genre, I did not have experience composing it, not nearly like I did writing countless school essays. Devitt calls established genres that we already know how to do "antecedent genres" and explains that such tacit knowledge will "help writers move into a new genre; they help writers adjust their old situations to new locations" (222). This makes sense as to why my short story about strange toxins, emitting from a chemical plant and making people laugh in their sleep, read more like a paper for science class. Essays were my "old situation" and became so embedded in my mind that it became the way I approached *all* writing without even realizing it, which then negatively affected the short story, my desired "new location" (Devitt 222). Without understanding the limits of my antecedent knowledge and without considering what was different about the new genre, I fell miserably short. So it seems that while my antecedent genre helped me produce something, it also hindered me from producing the new genre effectively because these two genres are not the same.

Could antecedent genres help to explain the multitudes of vampire tropes out there? Did the use of vampire as an artistic effect become embedded in certain genre productions, creating a seeming blend of old/new vampires, yet hindering new production enough to keep them recognizable to the point of being cliché? Does an antecedent genre answer the case of Dracula selling car insurance on a commercial? What was the purpose of its artistic effect? I wonder . . .

## Like Wild Garlic Growing Over Every Inch of the Earth

I return to Bawarshi and Reiff, who write, "Genres are understood as forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations" (4). I had written in my class notes that genre is "always mediated, always social." Now I really start to piece this together. In order to carry out composition or any literate activity (be it writing, speaking, signing, photographing, videoing, coding, etc.), we require something other than ourselves to make it happen. Languages, tools, practices, forms, formats, and modes help us carry out our communication intent and are bridges between ourselves and our social world(s). And no matter how isolated an act of composition may feel, it is always social.

This complexity deepens when we, like a video camera, begin to move back and try to take in how many separate genres go into the making of larger or more complex genres, which I find in my notes are called "genre sets" that become part of larger systems. Could activity systems explain why vampire tropes are found in so many genres?

Here, I pan out on this large activity system and see how the series of genre activities are situated in not only culture, but also a place and time in history. In this panned out view, I can observe that it isn't just one individual performing the actions of genre. Communities, institutions, worlds are too. In fact, a person's genre actions mediate and are mediated by clusters of literate doings, happenings, and situations that mediate and are mediated by other clusters of literate doings and happenings and so on and so on. (I'm picturing the underground root system of wild garlic covering every inch of the earth's surface.)

## Quick, Grab a Wooden Stake: It's CHAT!

Searching through class readings, I come to understand that genre activities are part of larger and yet larger activity systems. Scholar David Russell sheds light on this and writes, "Human activities are complex systems in constant change, interactions, and self-reorganization as human beings collaboratively adapt to and transform their environment through their actions with tools (including writing)" (55). So here, the vampire trope is taken up by genres that then "re-organize" how the vampire character may look and act. I begin to question how vampire tropes are taken up by these activity systems that change them and yet keep them the same in some way. When genres take up the vampire trope, then does it become an antecedent genre for the next activity system that calls for such an artistic effect? At this point, I need a map, a specific map, one that can help me to analyze vampire tropes in various genre activity systems over time.

Referring to notes that I had just taken in class and from reading assignments, I knew that I had entered into the daunting world of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Paul Prior and others write that CHAT helps us go "beyond any single setting . . . offers a new map for an expansive attention to the rhetorical dimensions of all activity" (25). Once I had a specific research question, however, this theory did not seem as intimidating. Given the scope of my inquiry, I was in need of "a new map . . . [one that allows for] expansive attention" (Prior 25). In fact, CHAT gave my research direction, allowing me to explore vampire tropes in distinct ways and from different perspectives, such as its **activity** as well as its **production, representation, distribution, socialization, reception, and ecology**.[2] While I began to understand these terms and how they could help me to answer how vampire tropes are taken up by activity systems over time, I knew I needed to focus on specific genres that used vampires.

## Where in the Coffin Do I Start?

Thinking of the GEICO commercial and their giddy Dracula at the blood drive, I decided to research where Count Dracula began: Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, *Dracula*, which I had read in high school. Using my preferred prewriting research activity, I searched "Bram Stoker" and "Dracula" in *Wikipedia*, refreshed my memory about the novel's plot, and then went on to read about Stoker's life and times. I checked *Wikipedia's* references and followed a trail of research that led me to books, articles, reviews, blogs, and annotations about Bram Stoker, his novel, and the various influences that helped Stoker shape his particular vampire.

Remembering my main research question (do genres that use vampire tropes become antecedent genres for other activity systems?), I was particularly interested in Stoker's influences. I found that Stoker had written extensive notes while drafting his novel, notes that modern-day scholars Robert Eighteen-Bisang and Elizabeth Miller have annotated, that could help me learn more about versions of vampire tropes before Stoker's time. These researchers led me to John William Polidori's 1819 novella "Vampyre." I had a hunch that I was traveling back in time because of the change in spelling. But before going back, I needed to chart the things I had learned (the data) about Bram Stoker and his *Dracula*.

## Putting Method to the Blood-Sucking Madness

This is where CHAT really helped. After I understood CHAT terms and the specific views of literate activity that these provided, I organized them in a way that would best help me map my research. To answer my questions would require broad research. I would need to collect a lot of specific data and analyze it, looking for patterns on how vampire adaptations stayed the same or changed over time, and if those adaptations influenced other genres.

I began to feel overwhelmed here. Thinking it over, however, I solved this by deciding to narrow CHAT terms to their most basic meanings in order to gather the most specific tidbits of information, making it easier to chart and analyze later (Figure 2).

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Production-** specific author(s) and tools used to produce it | **Representation-** how the genre is conceptualized, including main characteristics & conventions | **Activity (& Modality)-** modes used to produce and distribute the genre | **Time period and location** | **Socialization-** social and cultural practices and beliefs during the time | **Ecology-** the physical & biological environment at the time | **Reception-** how the genre is taken up and/or repurposed later |

Figure 2: Mapping the Evolution of Vampire Tropes, Using the Basic Meanings of CHAT Terms

Since I was looking at vampire tropes over *time*, I added one more category—"Time period and location"—which would help me track any sort of progression. I placed this category in the center of the chart because it is the most important organizational unit for my study.

While I had taken pages of notes on Stoker's *Dracula*, once I had a specific method, I found most of these notes included extra details. I went back over them, selecting only the information that would complete my chart. Mapping this digitally helped me keep my work concise, which would make for easier analysis later (Figure 3).

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bram Stoker uses paper, ink, and researches about real evil people (Vlad III) and lore about vampires | Count Dracula lives castle in Transylvania, weak in sunlight, has fangs, feeds on women, puts them in trance | Stoker's *Dracula*, written as a series of travelogues, ship logs, letters, and diary entries, and now includes vampire hunters | **1897, Great Britain and Ireland** | Many foreigners move to London, England; many at the time fear any sort of foreigner, viewing them as harmful "others" | People dying of contagious diseases, e.g. Tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted, Syphilis | Dracula becomes definitive model of a vampire, a major influence on movies and shows based on Dracula's traits |
| **Production-** specific author(s) and tools used to produce it | **Representation-** how the genre is conceptualized, including main characteristics & conventions | **Activity (& Modality)-** modes used to produce and distribute the genre | **Time period and location** | **Socialization-** social and cultural practices and beliefs during the time | **Ecology-** the physical & biological environment at the time | **Reception-** how the genre is taken up and/or repurposed later |

Figure 3: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, My First Entry on My Vampire Trope CHAT Map

## Time Travel Logs: Interview with Vampire Tropes

Focusing on one of the main inspirations behind Stoker's *Dracula*, I traveled back to the early nineteenth century and to the young physician

John William Polidori. After some mystery, Polidori was identified as the author of the very influential novella (a short novel), *Vampyre*, that featured the first modern-day version of a vampire, Lord Ruthven. Starting again with *Wikipedia* and following the contributors' sources, I found that Polidori's novella was created at the same time as Mary Shelley's *The Modern Prometheus: Frankenstein*. During this summer, a few famous writers lived together and challenged one another to write a better ghost story. *Vampyre* was one of the many fictional results of this challenge.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Physician John William Polidori uses paper, ink, and publishes under the name of a famous author at the time; mystery about the real author until later | In Polidori's novella, an evil vampire, Lord Ruthven, lives among high society people, preying on high society women, killing them | A novella, a longer type of a short story, published as "Vampyre" that uses the 1734 spelling, which is a French-Turkish word for "witch" | **1819, England, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* created and published around the same time** | Gothic revival, dark, oppressive, intimidating horror; Polidori's vampire start of the modern day vampire who are said to be secretly living among us | Summer of heavy rains, floods, illnesses keeping them indoors; writers attempt to write the best ghost story to cure boredom | Plays, operas, poems are written about vampires; Bram Stoker uses the Lord Ruthven vampire to help shape his famous character and novel, *Dracula* |
| **Production-** specific author(s) and tools used to produce it | **Representation-** how the genre is conceptualized, including main characteristics & conventions | **Activity (& Modality)-** modes used to produce and distribute the genre | **Time period and location** | **Socialization-** social and cultural practices and beliefs during the time | **Ecology-** the physical & biological environment at the time | **Reception-** how the genre is taken up and/or repurposed later |

Figure 4: Mapping John William Polidori's 1819 Novella, *Vampyre*

Reading these interesting facts, I eagerly sifted through details to locate the CHAT data to chart. I paid attention to the **socialization** and **ecology** of these times because they seemed to be key factors, influencing the production of the vampire trope (Figure 4). I also learned that the notion of "what is a vampyre" changed a great deal during this time. But before I could completely appreciate how significant Polidori's vampire adaptation was, I needed to learn where his production started and if he had modified it from his past. Still curious about the spelling of "vampyre," I consulted the *Oxford English Dictionary* for a word etymology that would help me trace the origins and history of this unfamiliar word.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provided just what I needed, sending me back to the year of 1734. The word "vampyre," a French-from-Turkish word meaning, "witch," was first recorded in a travelogue, *Travels of Three English Gentlemen*. Here, I learned how vampire legends originated outside of Western Europe and were brought back by wealthy individuals who traveled to different cultures, particularly Eastern. By researching and using CHAT, I was able to see how vampires actually took shape as a trope in folklore told over centuries (Figure 5). Although the word 'vampyre' was not used, these versions from various cultures were precursors to them. Stories of devils and dead spirits who live off the flesh and blood of the living were passed on since ancient times. Truly, these ancestors of the more modern vampire were the embodiment of evil, which interestingly, after the spread of Christianity, were given the characteristic of being able to come back from the dead. And when these wealthy Englishmen returned home, they not only shared these stories, but also modified them, saying that there were bewitching servants of evil living in these cultures, feeding off the blood (but not the flesh) of the living, in effect, specializing these dead/undead creatures, making them a bit more human, but keeping them just as threatening, calling them "vampyres."

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| European aristocrats travel and bring back stories of foreigners | *Vampyres* said to be sucking just the blood of the living | Travelogues written, such as *Travels of Three English Gentlemen* | **1734, Eastern Europe, Balkans, and Greece** | Christianity spreads and so does the belief in coming back from the dead | Belief that evil and sin resides inside the body | Travelogues bring feeling of truth of tales to Europe |
| People share stories, writing, even hieroglyphics | Devils and dead spirits who live off the "life essence" of the living | Folklore, oral stories passed on; Greek and Roman myths | **11-13 centuries, accounts based on ancient myths** | Belief in flesh-eating, blood-drinking devils | Lack of modern scientific understanding | Tales of demonic possessions believed as truth for centuries |
| **Production-** specific author(s) and tools used to produce it | **Representation-** how the genre is conceptualized, including main characteristics & conventions | **Activity (& Modality)-** modes used to produce and distribute the genre | **Time period and location** | **Socialization-** social and cultural practices and beliefs during the time | **Ecology-** the physical & biological environment at the time | **Reception-** how the genre is taken up and/or repurposed later |

Figure 5: Mapping How Vampires Took Shape as a Trope in Folklore Told Over Centuries

## Feel the Iron-Rich Robustness: Blood Type CHAT, Of Course

At this point, I felt grateful to have a theory like CHAT traveling with me. Websites, annotations, and books from the library captivated me with rich details, but CHAT helped to keep me focused. I was able to get information quickly because I knew what I was looking for. I used general terms and summaries, situating vampires in various cultural-historical contexts, which gave me a panned out view of how the vampire trope evolved throughout genres in history. The most interesting part was getting to view the formation of the modern-day vampire.

Coming to the twentieth century, I entered into the mode of the motion picture. Here, past vampire texts were taken up by new media forms, adding visualizations to old stories. Influences from the silent films *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Dracula* (1936) can still be seen today. I filled my research chart by selecting key movies, books, and television shows of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Figure 6, Top Three Sections). The finished product is indicative of a lot of research. CHAT helped me by keeping me on track with the specific data I needed (Figure 6).

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Many authors, screenwriters, collaborators, artists; vampires as a public domain to adapt | Diverse and complex plots, focus on vampire hunters, and vampires as a part of everyday society | Films, TV series, novels, video games, comics, graphic novels, commercials, ads, and products | **Current Times, Global market** | Some are: Marvel Comic's *Blade* films, Film and TV series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* TV series, *Angel,* Film, *The Hunger,* Novel into Film, *Interview with the Vampire*, TV series, *Moonlight*, Film *Underworld,* Film *Van Helsing,* TV miniseries *Salem's Lot,* Novels into film, *Twilight* series, cable TV, *True Blood,* CW's TV series *The Vampire Diaries,* role-playing games, *Vampire: the Masquerade,* video games, *Castlevania, Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Fallout 3* | | |
| W.E. Daniel Ross uses female pen names to publish thirty-three novels; Anne Rice uses mostly first-person narration over twelve novels, two films | Vampire is now romantic hero, character to feel sympathy for instead of simply embodiment of evil; featuring relationships and immorality | Multivolume epic, episodic novels and TV shows in gothic romance style, such as *Dark Shadows* and Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* | **1966-2003, Canada, United States, Western Europe, and beyond** | Markets expand; niche audiences become more mainstream; sex, power, politics, immortality are hot topics; vampire relationships sell! | Advances in scientific knowledge of pathogens; being healthy is more a matter of lifestyle and personal choice | Vampire romantic hero, conflicted on choosing to use powers for good or evil; vampires covens, families, and hierarchies, e.g. Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga |
| Henrik Galeen writes screenplay of *Dracula*, directed by F.W. Murnau, which was shot using only one camera, one negative | Count Dracula becomes Count Orlok, looks like an evil *Shrek*, has zombie-like curled fingers, kills his victims, dies in sunlight | The silent film, *Nosferatu,* an unauthorized adaptation, only one negative, but was distributed before law suit; film destroyed | **1922, Germany** | Many believe that family members are vampires; birth deformities saw to be vampire-like; *Nosferatu* based on one creator's war experience | Period of dark Romanticism; evil portrayed as devils, ghouls, ghosts, witches, werewolves, and vampires | Fans keep version alive, inspiring many other films, plays, and books, such as Steven King's *Salem's Lot*, which comes to TV in 1979 |
| Bram Stoker uses paper, ink, and researches about real evil people (Vlad III) and lore about vampires | Count Dracula lives castle in Transylvania, weak in sunlight, has fangs, feeds on women, puts them in trance | Stoker's *Dracula*, written as a series of travelogues, ship logs, letters, and diary entries, and now includes vampire hunters | **1897, Great Britain and Ireland** | Many foreigners move to London, England; many at the time fear any sort of foreigner, viewing them as harmful "others" | People dying of contagious diseases, e.g. Tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted, Syphilis | Dracula becomes definitive model of a vampire, a major influence on movies and shows based on Dracula's traits |
| Physician John William Polidori uses paper, ink, and publishes under the name of a famous author at the time; mystery about the real author until later | In Polidori's novella, an evil vampire, Lord Ruthven, lives among high society people, preying on high society women, killing them | A novella, a longer type of a short story, published as "Vampyre" that uses the 1734 spelling, which is a French-Turkish word for "witch" | **1819, England, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* created and published around the same time** | Gothic revival, dark, oppressive, intimidating horror; Polidori's vampire start of the modern day vampire who are said to be secretly living among us | Summer of heavy rains, floods, illnesses keeping them indoors; writers attempt to write the best ghost story to cure boredom | Plays, operas, poems are written about vampires; Bram Stoker uses the Lord Ruthven vampire to help shape his famous character and novel, *Dracula* |
| European aristocrats travel and bring back stories of foreigners | *Vampyres* said to be sucking just the blood of the living | Travelogues written, such as *Travels of Three English Gentlemen* | **1734, Eastern Europe, Balkans, and Greece** | Christianity spreads and so does the belief in coming back from the dead | Belief that evil and sin resides inside the body | Travelogues bring feeling of truth of tales to Europe |
| People share stories, writing, even hieroglyphics | Devils and dead spirits who live off the "life essence" of the living | Folklore, oral stories passed on; Greek and Roman myths | **11-13 centuries, accounts based on ancient myths** | Belief in flesh-eating, blood-drinking devils | Lack of modern scientific understanding | Tales of demonic possessions believed as truth for centuries |
| **Production-** specific author(s) and tools used to produce it | **Representation-** how the genre is conceptualized, including main characteristics & conventions | **Activity (& Modality)-** modes used to produce and distribute the genre | **Time period and location** | **Socialization-** social and cultural practices and beliefs during the time | **Ecology-** the physical & biological environment at the time | **Reception-** how the genre is taken up and/or repurposed later |

Figure 6: Complete Vampire Trope CHAT Map—Top Three Sections Cover 1922 to Present

## Genre Studies and CHAT: My Guiding Moonlight

With my map complete, I could analyze the ways that each genre used this trope and how these adaptations became antecedent genres for later systems. As each genre took up the trope, the actual characterization of the vampire changed, sometimes dramatically, thus affecting future productions and sometimes influencing the production of new genres. Folkloric genres in early history manufactured grotesque vampires that were portrayed as devils feeding off both flesh and blood. Later genres, specifically in nineteenth-century England, took up this trope and transformed it, making the vampire persona more attractive and mysterious. These vampires were given the ability to blend into society, finding sustenance in the blood of the wealthy and also attractive. During this time and place in history, fear of foreigners (both people from foreign regions and foreign pathogens that caused incurable diseases) seemed embodied in the European vampire trope. Vampires were foreigners, others, like us but not like us, which gave the vampire the talent to kill or infest human beings without their victims knowing.

Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* is the perfect example of this cunning sort of vampire. Dracula's high society victims, particularly his female victims, are completely unaware of his inherent evil and malicious intent. Through real-world genres of letters, ships logs, and journal entries, we come to learn the story of *Dracula*. Although these are fictional accounts and testimonies, these genres inside the novel read as if they were real. The Dracula character could not be told in a typical story format with a beginning, middle, and end, but rather it was told by many genres across time and many settings. This demonstrates how the story of *Dracula* had to be witnessed or experienced. Just as Dracula in the novel didn't come from one form, but many, Dracula as a vampire trope didn't come from one genre activity, but many genre activities that predated it.[3]

Perhaps this is why Stoker's vampire novel became one of the most influential antecedent genres for other vampire texts in our time. Researching and CHAT mapping, I discovered how modern adaptations of vampire tropes have drawn on the antecedent genres that came before, and Stoker's novel of many genres seems to invite any writer working in a medium that calls for such artistic effect to take up his vampire trope, thus keeping vampires familiar and also in the state of flux—i.e. dynamic. Fusing prior genres' characterization of a vampire as foreigner who can blend in society without detection, today's vampire characters are often portrayed as sexy, forlorn outsiders, whose desires and obsessions for blood culminates as an internal conflict. For instance, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* employs this sort of modern vampire trope, suggesting that vampires have the choice of using their strengths and weaknesses for good or evil, giving vampires the free will to curb those deep-down desires. Just as past writers used vampires as metaphors for the fear of foreign people or pathogens, contemporary writers use vampires as metaphors for desires and obsessions, such as exploring forbidden sexual relations between vampires and humans, which seems to mimic real-life social tension about when it is okay to engage in sex and when it is not. Other modern vampire tropes still embody obsessions and desires, but for other things. Count von Count, the Muppet on *Sesame Street*, is evidence of this kind of vampire. While portrayed like other modern vampire tropes, this Muppet is a reclusive outsider obsessed (not with the hunger for blood but) with numbers and counting, which seems to be the creators' way to say math is a mysterious but cool (cunning) subject.

## Where's My Reflection?

Looking back at this entire vampy investigation, I realize I would not have been able to do it without a better understanding of genre. Looking at the actions of writing and how genre serves both as a form and an influence, which shapes not only the composition, but also how we think and act socially, helped me to identify how vampire tropes have been used by writers to say something about the culture and times in which they live. It makes sense of when Bawarshi and Reiff write that genres are "forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations" (4). Genres are "forms of cultural knowledge" that are reflected in the thoughts and actions of individuals as well as of societies and systems. The vampire tropes taken up by countless genres and activity systems allow for people to play out social beliefs and conditions in an artistic way that they couldn't have done otherwise, thereby both *contributing to and challenging* future forms and actions.

Using CHAT, I was able to get inside these genres and activity systems and map how, in particular, **representation, distribution, socialization,** and **ecology** affected composition, which then affected how and why the vampire tropes were used, which then influenced how overused the antecedent genre became, one that was continually written, amended, and rewritten. Messy is the business of antecedent transfer. Remembering back to my first short story and how it turned out to be more like a school essay, I realize that when relying on antecedent genres without considering the new genre, the result doesn't quite work. Antecedents can enable and constrain new productions at the same time. And while I still have many questions about vampire tropes, for now, I have solved the mystery of why Dracula was in a commercial. Overall, vampire tropes have been used to the point that older antecedents, such as Dracula, are downright cliché, becoming a cultural-historical point of reference, or a collective inside joke.

In short, why is Dracula in a commercial selling car insurance, anyway? Well, because his writer—and that particular genre, and the genre that came before, and the genre that came before that, and so on, and so on—says he can.

## Endnotes

[1] The commercial "Happier than Dracula Volunteering at Blood Drive" is a part of GEICO Insurance's 2012 "Happier Than . . ." advertisement campaign by The Martin Agency, Inc. Timothy Ryan Cole plays Jimmy, Alex Harvey plays Ronnie, and Frankie Ray plays Dracula.

[2] "Resituating and Re-mediating the Canons" (Prior et al.) offers a robust explanation of CHAT.

[3] Dracula's name was inspired by a prince, Vlad III, notoriously known as Vlad the Impaler.

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# In the Twilight of the Modern Age: What Stephenie Meyer Can Teach Us About CHAT

Ryan Edel

Whatever your thoughts on the book, the audience responses to *Twilight* offer important insights regarding how books are produced and then taken up by society. Examining this can help us better understand Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in terms of three major components: the act of writing, cultural views, and physical resources.

## A Note to Readers: QR Codes

I've embedded QR Codes with links to my sources for the article. If you have a smartphone or tablet, simply search for "QR Code Scanner" in your app store, and then use the camera on your device like a bar code scanner. —Ryan

## Prologue: How We See Twilight

Once, I heard a well-published novelist say that *Harry Potter* suffered the same problem of many books in its genre—he said it was a good *read*, but not very well *written*.

I had to bite my tongue. I mean, if *Harry Potter* isn't one of the best-written books I've ever read, then what was wrong with me as a reader? Only later did it occur to me that this particular author had probably never read *Harry Potter*. He may have felt he didn't need to. But then, we often hear critiques like this regarding popular books. Stephen King, for example, is not considered a "literary" author, even though his books have been read and loved by exceptional numbers of people. Ditto for Danielle Steele.

And yet these authors are popular. They live the dream I have long wanted for myself: they make a living from their writing. Their books are read, and read often.

Figure 1

Normally, non-fans tend to accept this success. But not when it comes to Stephenie Meyer. Somehow, it seems that her works—*Twilight*, in particular—have been singled out as being particularly "bad." Or, as Stephenie Meyer writes on her website: "Even those of you who love *Twilight* the most . . . have probably noticed that there's been just a teensy little bit of backlash following the success of the books and films" (stepheniemeyer.com, 14 August 2013). (See figure 1 or http://stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html).

## CHAT: An Introduction

Thus, we have two groups: those who want to burn *Twilight* on sight and those who feel the fire of the heart stoked by these words on paper. Understanding what it is about *Twilight* that can stir up such strong emotions is an important part of understanding how today's audiences respond to the books people write.

To sort through these issues, we can turn to CHAT. When it comes to writing, CHAT helps us understand texts as more than mere words on a page. It helps us position texts as social objects, show why they were written in their present form, and then discuss how they're used by their audiences (whether read for pleasure, disdained for immorality, or used as a how-to guide for seducing vampires).

## CHAT: Breaking It Down

There are seven individual components to CHAT, but I find it helps to focus these into three major areas: the **act of writing**, the **cultural views** surrounding the reading and writing of these texts, and the **physical resources** available for production and distribution. There are interconnections across all seven components, but these three broad categories give a good place to start. But they're just a shortcut I've come up with—you might find them helpful, or you might find something better. The **seven individual components** of CHAT (on the right-hand side of the Figure 2 chart) are still the most important parts to remember.

| Ryan's Major Areas | The Seven Individual Components of CHAT |
|---|---|
| The Act of Writing | **Production***– actually writing (and the tools you use to do so)<br>**Activity**** – stuff writers do while writing |
| Cultural Views | **Representation*** – how people see the importance of writing (not just one text, but all pieces of writing)<br>**Socialization** – what people do with a work of writing<br>**Reception** – how people value a specific work of writing |
| Physical Resources | **Ecology*** – the physical materials and environment surrounding the writer and readers (e.g. books vs. Kindle)<br>**Distribution**** – how writers get their works into the hands of their audiences |

* **Production, Representation,** and **Ecology** would be considered the "essential" definition of the associated major area. You can't have an act of writing without production, but the activities surrounding your production can have a major impact on the results of your work.

** **Distribution** and **Activity** are very flexible concepts, and they could easily be placed in other major categories. For example, *New York Times* bestselling novelist E. Lynn Harris placed copies of his first book at beauty parlors around Atlanta. In this case, the activity of his readers going in for a perm became a major component of distribution– and both would then be tied to cultural views relating to why his target audience of African-American women frequented those particular beauty parlors (Valerie Peterson for About.com). See above QR code or http://publishing.about.com/od/SelfPublishingAndVanityPresses/a/Self-Publishing-Success-Stories.htm.

Figure 2

To make my approach to CHAT a bit more memorable, I've prepared a brief diagram:

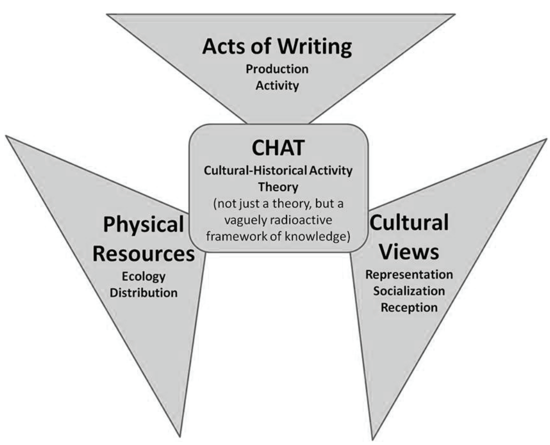


Figure 3

For a specific comparison of CHAT to other models of writing, be sure to see this handout by Kellie Sharp-Hoskins and Erin Frost (Figure 4 or http://isuwriting.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/chat_overview.pdf).

Figure 4

## Trajectory and Uptake: What Books Do

Now, before we get into *Twilight*, there's one more crucial aspect of CHAT: **trajectory**. If you've ever seen a space shuttle launch, then you already understand the first component of trajectory: it's the direction a work goes in physical space. A space shuttle goes up into orbit; *Twilight* gets shelved in bookstores around the world.

The second component of trajectory, though, is **uptake**: the way people take in a work, the way they adapt and adopt it as part of their lives. The space shuttle didn't just go up into space. It led ten-year-olds to eat a dried-up strawberry brick in a vacuum-sealed pouch labeled "ice cream." Likewise, *Twilight* has a cultural presence beyond the e-book stored on my iPad. It has been taken up through movies, fan pages, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Trajectory isn't just about getting a story into the hands of your readers—it's about what your readers do with the work after it's out in the world. And this is why CHAT is so important. Traditionally, we often think of a work as being "done" or "finished" once the writer has typed in that last word. But *writing* the text is only part of the picture.

## The Act of Writing: Production and Activity in *Twilight*

With writing, many people only think of **production**, the actual act of placing words on the page. And production isn't necessarily an easy thing—we park ourselves in front of the computer or we poise ourselves over that blank sheet of paper, pen in hand, and we write. Or we try to. Usually, there's some daydreaming involved. You have to kind of imagine what you're going to say. And then writer's block might set in, or we might get only twenty minutes before something else comes up. And what happens when your pen runs out of ink? (See Ecology.) Or when your mother comes in and tells you to give up writing because "You're no Stephen King?" (See Representation.) Or maybe you need to have a pile of books stacked around you because you're madly skimming for quotes to fit into that paper on *Madame Bovary*? (See Activity.)

Production, then, is never this pristine event that occurs in isolation. For Meyer, getting to the act of production meant working around the other concerns in her life. She is, after all, a mother with three children. In 2003, when the idea for *Twilight* first came to her, writing was "something I hadn't done in so long that I wondered why I was bothering" (stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html: see Figure 2 QR Code).

At this point in Meyer's experience, it becomes impossible to separate the production of her writing from Activity. In CHAT, activity describes all that stuff you do while engaged in the act of writing. For Meyer, as the mother of three young boys, most of that "stuff" meant that she was doing a lot of her "writing" away from the computer. "Meyer invented the plot during the day through swim lessons and potty training, and wrote it out late at night when the house was quiet" (stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html).

So you might ask, "Well, is that really writing? How can you be *writing* while you're in the middle of getting a child to sit down on a potty and . . . well . . . you know . . . " Short answer: Yes, that's writing; it's the act of arranging thoughts into the coherent framework. There are those who will argue that *Twilight* isn't "coherent" (see Reception), but the book has a firm narrative. Despite what critics might say, Meyer arranged her work to build emotional tension. Don't be misled by assumptions that the book isn't "sophisticated." Bella moves to Oregon, experiences unfortunate events which require help from the local neighborhood vampire, and then has her life saved by said vampire—yes, it sounds simple, but the summary overlooks the interconnections between events. Bella is leaving her home to spend time with her father in a town that's overcast and boring—she's lonely, she's not looking for love, and her clumsy nature makes her an exceptionally vulnerable individual. So when there are vampires in the town that conspicuously glitter in the sunlight, she might be the perfect match for these creatures who must isolate themselves from society. But she's also the ultimate challenge for a supernatural being who lives forever. How, Edward asks himself, will I keep this girl from getting hurt? And how, Bella asks herself in turn, will I convince Edward that I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself?

Although often overlooked by critics, it's these interpersonal conflicts which make *Twilight* not only a "good read," but an emotionally riveting love story. Sure, critics will use labels like "incoherent" as a way to denigrate the book, as a way to imply that the crucial act of organization hasn't happened, but it's clear from the text that Meyer put a lot of thought into her work.

Many feel justified in this critique because Meyer wrote her first draft over the course of only three months. Yes—three months (stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html). But this shows that sitting down to write and getting that work *written* is often far more important than "training" or "preparing" to write. Production, in my eyes, remains the most important component of CHAT—we have to look at what we are doing in order to make sure the words make their way to the page.

## Cultural Views Surrounding That Infernal Book: Representation, Reception, Socialization, Reception, and Representation–Inextricably Linked

**Reception** examines how audiences respond to a specific text. It's what you think of the work, whether you like it or hate it or share it with your friends or toss it in a bonfire.

The ways audiences receive books are closely tied to how they view writing. In CHAT, **representation** addresses the ways in which people see the activity of writing. For example, a Ph.D. student in English might see writing as a complex communication activity that is worthy of long-term research. For a science fiction fan, writing might be a way to explore the "what if?" possibilities of our technological future. For both these groups, writing is seen as a rewarding activity—but the grad student wants to study writing itself, whereas the science fiction reader really just wants to use writing as a means to study something else.

With *Twilight*, the differences in representation lead readers to display very different receptions. Some readers feel that good writing must be "well written" —each sentence shows a clearly rhythmic structure that is clear and easy to follow. For others, the story itself is more important—they want to see a clear progression of events from start to finish. It's not that either group has a "better" or "more valid" reception of a given text—it's that these two groups have differing representations of what matters in writing, and this leads them to value individual texts differently.

We have to understand that Meyer's work exists not only as a series of novels, but as a written text existing within a cultural space. Many cultural spaces, in fact—and several of them are conflicting. Let's start with the romantic elements of the book. As Kira Cochrane of *The Guardian* points out, Twilight poses a bit of a social enigma:

Figure 5

> . . . the most interesting outcome of Meyer's work has been the window it has opened on the desires of a generation of girls. Just what is it about the controlling, mercurial vampire Edward Cullen—a character who constantly tells his girlfriend he's dangerous, who constantly polices the couple's sexual boundaries—that they're so drawn to? (See Figure 5 or http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/11/stephenie-meyer-twilight-the-host.)

As Cochrane points out, *Twilight* is reflective of society. *Twilight* didn't suddenly create this idea of vampire love which turns people crazy for books—instead, Meyer's portrayal of Edward and Bella reveals the unmet desires of many readers. For these readers, *Twilight* isn't just a good book—it resonates with the soul. It captures the frustration of the girl who lives this nothing life in some nothing town surrounded by nothing friends—but there's this *chance* that Mr. Amazing Vampire will fall so madly in love with her that all the nothing of her life will no longer matter.

But not everyone reads the book the same way. As one reader writes in an interview for *Psychology Today*:

> . . . I, like every other reader, identified with Bella . . . . I do know how easy it is to project yourself onto her. I read Bella as a more upbeat character, an essentially happy and outgoing girl, while my more quiet friend read her as slightly more brooding and intense. In any case, in uniting myself with Bella in my mind, I became that much more invested in the story . . .

Figure 6

(See Figure 6 or http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/snow-white-doesnt-live-here-anymore/200903/five-reasons-smart-young-woman-adores-twilight-part-.)

For others, the message of the book gives young women the wrong impressions about love and gender equality. Emily Severance of Cederville University writes that the book is:

> . . . a step back for women in general. Bella's character lacks any sort of independence to make her own decisions because she is completely (and willingly) controlled by Edward.

(See Figure 7 or http://cedars.cedarville.edu/article/52/Twilight-Sends-Wrong-Message/.)

Figure 7

Say what you will about the love between Bella and Edward, it *feels* genuine. Well, at least to me. I am concerned, though, that it shows Bella as being overly dependent upon Edward, and that this could be construed as saying that women "should" be secondary to their male partners. In most cases, when there's a boyfriend who sneaks in at night to watch his not-yet-girlfriend sleep, I would call that stalking. But here it somehow works.

## Socialization: Because Writing Affects Our Behavior as People

An individual's views about books will have an effect on how that individual views reading, writing, and the world. People can become very emotional—or even angry—about how writing is represented and received because the ways we view writing can change our behavior. This is **socialization**: the ways we use writing as part of our daily lives.

With writing, the classic example of socialization is the cookbook—with a cookbook, you can follow the recipes to prepare food. Some individuals view cookbooks as providing the best directions for how to mix and then heat ingredients (representation); typically, these individuals will follow the recipes exactly (socialization). Sometimes, though, there will be a cookbook which everyone knows is a bad book. Like if you had a book titled "The Well-Rounded Marshmallow: A Vegan's Guide to Dessert," then you should probably tell your friends to avoid this book because marshmallows *aren't* vegan, and I'd have serious trust issues with someone who attempts to misrepresent food in a cookbook (reception).

*Twilight* is a bit more complicated. It's not a "recipe" for love, but many readers see novels as models of real life (representation). For those who "agree" with the "message" of *Twilight*, this might simply mean they spend many hours reading, or it might mean they line up at Barnes and Noble for book release parties, or it could mean they dress up as Edward Cullen for Halloween. Because their reception of *Twilight* invokes feelings of love they themselves yearn for, their socialization typically involves behaviors which further promote the book to their friends.

However, not everyone "agrees" with the book's "message." For those who disagree with *Twilight*, the book becomes dangerous influence on young minds. For them, it's not just that *Twilight* is "bad" or "poorly written" or "sexist" or whatever—they believe the *socialization* from *Twilight* may have negative impacts on society. Or, as Britton Peele writes for the pop culture website of the *Dallas Morning News*:

> But it is true that the *Twilight* books aren't masterpieces of writing. That's OK, to some degree. Sometimes a lighter, easier read is better for the reader, especially if you're writing for a younger crowd. But good grief, the fact that we have raised some young people who genuinely think *Twilight* is an amazing achievement and "the best book series ever" might mean we've failed as a species.

Figure 8

(See Figure 8 or http://popcultureblog.dallasnews.com/2012/11/im-a-dude-who-read-all-the-twilight-books-heres-why-i-hate-it-and-why-i-get-it.html/.)

Our "failure as a species"? I want to be like "wait . . . it's just a book." But its popularity has created a backlash. People fear the book is encouraging millions of readers to follow some terrible road to hell.

But it's only fiction, right? Why not criticize something like *The Anarchist's Cookbook*? The socialization for *that* book involves the manufacture of explosives and the systematic destruction of society. Those are quantifiably bad things, right?

Except *The Anarchist's Cookbook* isn't popular enough to be a marker of species-wide failure. The book isn't threatening to most people because it doesn't have sufficient trajectory. You won't see dozens of copies stacked up in an island of glossy hardbacks right there in the middle of Barnes and Noble. So as a "recipe for disaster," it's a disappointment not because of the contents, but because of the lack of readers.

## Crossing Cultures: How Twilight Affects Native Americans

As a rule, I am wary of people who say that a book is going to "destroy society" or who say a book is "the most amazing thing ever!" Contemporary society is far too complex for any one work of writing to have *that* much of an effect.

However, American society has a major effect on other societies—and any work which shifts American attitudes can have serious repercussions for social groups who don't happen to control an international superpower.

Thus far, we've only considered *Twilight* in terms of "popular" American culture—the culture of high school, teen romance, and "family values." But *Twilight's* portrayal of Jacob and other Native American characters has had a significant effect on the Quileute people—and not necessarily a positive one. As Dr. Deanna Dart-Newton and Tasia Endo point out in their post on the Burke Museum's website:

> Made famous by the recent pop-culture phenomenon *Twilight*, the Quileute people have found themselves thrust into the global spotlight. Their reservation, a once quiet and somewhat isolated place, is now a popular tourist destination for thousands of middle-school-age girls and their families. In the wake of the popularity of the book and film saga, the Quileute Tribe has been forced to negotiate the rights to their own oral histories, ancient regalia and mask designs, and even the sanctity of their cemetery.

Figure 9

(See Figure 9 or http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/truth_vs_twilight/.)

Because the reception of *Twilight* is so positive among so many millions of readers, the actual Quileute Indians must now compete with fictional characters and enthusiastic fans for the right to identify their own reality. CHAT is important because it helps us understand not only what we see, but also what we *don't* see. Readers don't want to make life hard for the Quileute people—but they aren't aware that they have done so. For readers who don't know much about Native American culture, the portrayals of characters like Jacob are so memorable that *Twilight* has helped them *think* that they understand.

The mistake made by critics, though, is to blame effects like this solely on *Twilight*, when the reality is that our society has systematically pushed Native American cultures to the fringes culturally and economically.

The systematic oppression of Native American tribes has been so successful that most Americans today are unaware of this history. When teenagers and their parents read *Twilight*, they often don't realize these larger social issues. As a result, *Twilight* encourages socialization practices which further contribute to this marginalization. This, however, was not Stephenie Meyer's intention. As she writes:

> . . . around the same time that I realized it would be out of character for Edward to be able to admit that he was a vampire, I discovered the existence of La Push and started reading about the Quileute's unique history and culture. Jacob developed really naturally from that research, as a solution to my "how does Bella find out" dilemma and also as a way to enrich the mythology. If I hadn't always been very intrigued with Native American history, though, I don't know if the proximity of La Push would have resulted in Jacob's creation.

Figure 10

(See Figure 10 or http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/nm_movie_qanda.html.)

This example helps us see why CHAT is so important for understanding not only writing, but our role as writers. For Meyer, including Jacob and the Quileute in her novels was only intended to deepen the story and share her own fascination with Native American culture. And if we limited our analysis to the text alone, then we wouldn't necessarily see the full social trajectory.

## Distribution and Ecology: The Stuff You Have to Get Stuff to the Reader

**Ecology** is the collection of physical tools and constraints surrounding the writing process, whereas **distribution** is the means by which a text actually reaches its readers. Ultimately, the final **trajectory** of a text is very much dependent upon how easily a writer is able to produce a given work to a socially-acceptable standard, and then how quickly that work can then reach the hands of actual readers.

Meyer's blog says that she composed her work on a computer. This aspect of ecology significantly streamlined her distribution—with a quick click on "Print!" she was ready to market her work to publishers. Granted, she would have first needed to write a query letter for agents, and then a synopsis. And how would she know to do that? Checking the internet, of course.

Now add social media to the mix—in the past year, how many posts about *Twilight* have you seen? Fans are able to connect and share their love of the book with millions of their friends—sometimes to the tune of 81,000 tweets per day. (See Figure 11 or http://mashable.com/2009/11/18/twilight-new-moon-stats/.)

Figure 11

Although *Twilight* the text creates strong reactions among readers, the widespread nature of this response is only possible because of our modern ecologies of distribution. Books can be shipped to your doorstep in two days or less while friends tweet their thoughts to hundreds of people at a time (multiplied by millions of Twitter users . . . ).

Today's technology has created an unprecedented situation for writers: nearly any literate human being with access to a computer and the internet could theoretically write and distribute a novel. However, this type of statistic really only applies where broadband internet, reliable computers, and widespread education are considered the norm. As of 2012, the U.N. found that only a third of the world's population has access to the internet—in some nations, less than 1% of households have internet access. (See Figure 12 or http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/09/2012923232111323871.html.)

Figure 12

What's most impressive is that these widespread phenomena are taking place at a very personal level. Stephenie Meyer produced a digital draft of *Twilight* at her dining room table. I read the novel from an eight-dollar paperback from a local bookstore. And why? Because one of my best friends is a *major* fan. She posts on *Twilight* a couple times a week—or several times a day during the month leading up to a movie release. I can usually ignore hype, but it's hard to ignore a close friend who says "You need to read this book!" And I liked *Twilight* so much that I handed off my copy to my future wife.

Yes, *Twilight* the book is compelling, but I would argue that *Twilight* as a social phenomenon is only possible because of the Information Age. If Meyer had been limited to handwriting, would she have ever sent her drafts to publishers? If not for the ongoing personal reminders from Facebook, would I have bought the book? *Could* I have bought the book if not for the ubiquity of cheap paper?

## Wrapping Up: *Twilight*, CHAT, and Writing

Although personal impressions of the novel vary widely, the praise and criticism generated by *Twilight* help us better see that texts are more than mere words on a page. Instead, each text represents a social link between authors and readers. To succeed in writing, it isn't enough to master some set of "rules" governing how a text "should" be written. Instead, we must consider the ways in which our texts are meant to be read. Who's the audience? What does this audience look for? How can I convince this audience that mine is a work worth reading? What genre conventions (such as grammatical standards or methods of research) do I need to follow so that my audiences will value my work? Ultimately, what do I (as the writer) need to do in order to understand the likely trajectory of my work?

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# Mashup: Superheroes and Children's Literature

Jillian Burgess

In this article, Burgess analyzes the genre of superhero picture books in a unique way by researching both primary text examples and secondary sources. She looks at the many uses of superheroes and the genre of picture books by not only examining scholarly sources, but multiple examples of the genres as well. In doing so, she comes to learn that genre research can include many different approaches.

I first became interested in the production of children's books my junior year of high school when I took a class called Educating Young Children (or EYC). This class was for students interested in teaching and working with children. Throughout the school year, we would run a preschool program. We spent the whole year focused on lesson plans, snacks and everything else that comes with preschool. So, when it came to the time for finals, there really was not anything we could be tested on. Therefore, my teacher decided to have us write and illustrate a picture book that we could share with our class. I started my book thinking that this would be an easy, fun project, but I soon realized there was a lot more to creating a children's book.

The first thing I noticed when creating a picture book as an assignment was how different the writing situation was for me than it would be for an author hoping to publish such a book. Since I was not writing my book for publication, I went with a different approach to producing my book. I was mainly experimenting with writing in the children's book genre to learn more about this kind of writing, and the book I made was a way to test out what I learned. I first began by focusing on the actual genres I was writing in.

Learning more about this kind of writing was very important, since I did not have very much experience with it before. I decided that I wanted my children's book to have a theme. Thinking back to the books I read to my EYC students, I remembered how much all the kids loved superheroes; so, I decided to write a children's superhero themed book. But, I did not really know what that entailed. I knew that there were superhero stories, but I usually found them in the forms of movies or comic books. So, I thought that I should look more into the different types of genres that use these characters as well as the kinds of media used with these genres to see what similarities there were between them.

I tried going about finding research by searching words like "picture books," "superheroes," and "children's books" into Milner Library's search bar and found multiple hits. The first thing I noticed was that there were no critical sources specifically about superhero children's books, probably because it is such a specific genre. After noticing this, I realized finding sources was going to be a lot harder than I thought, and I might need to do more than one kind of research—library research and other kinds of genre research too. I also decided to just look at the two genres separately, one being superhero stories and the other being picture books.

By splitting up my research into a study of two separate genres, I was able to find much more: both scholarly sources on my genres as well as examples of them that I could study and analyze. There are lots of ways to learn about a genre, but I found it very beneficial to look at not only examples, but scholarly sources as well. Examples can offer a visual representation of what the genre is. By looking at multiple examples, I was able to compare them and see similarities, and then I was able to make a list of requirements for that genre. Scholarly sources give readers an insight that they might not be able to see from just looking at an example. By looking at what other experts have said about a genre, I was able to see things that I may have not have on my own. Reading what others have to say gave me new insights and knowledge into what I was creating—a picture book that featured superheroes. This was very important to me, so I made sure that along with my multiple examples of picture books, I also had scholarly sources on both picture books and how superheroes are used in all sorts of genres.

There were definitely a lot more scholarly sources about children books, because children's literature is so complex and has been written about critically so many times. Superhero stories, however, were different. I believe this might be because the superhero genre is not really a specific genre. Superhero stories can be told in so many different ways that they are not limited to one type, making the genre very flexible. For example, they can be told through literature, comic books, television shows, movies, and so on. After finding articles written by scholars about texts that featured superheroes and then reading what the authors had to say, I remembered that I was looking for similarities so I could connect the two ideas and write a picture book featuring superheroes, in essence drawing on several genres to produce something unique. So the next step in my research was to find similarities in the characteristics common to picture books and genres with superheroes. Both, for example, emphasize the values of good morals. But trying to figure out what combining genres would look like and trying to describe it was a lot more complicated than I thought it would be. Before I could put my scholarly research to use, I realized that I needed to build my context by gathering more examples.

## Two Genres in One

First off, I began to realize that I needed to ask the question of what even is a superhero picture book, but even this seemed overwhelming because there are so many different stories about so many different superheroes with different superpowers. They all have one thing in common though; they are picture books that feature a superhero or superheroes. The superheroes are not all exactly the same, but in children's literature, they are usually good and have positive values that they stand for. Since there are so many different forms of superhero picture books, I figured I should find a couple of good examples and go from there. Also, by choosing superhero picture books, I would have examples that fit both superhero stories and picture books, but were also examples of what I was actually creating.

I went about finding my examples by going to the Normal Public Library and searching the term "superhero" in their catalog with the restriction of "juvenile book" under specific item type. There were two books I found that seemed most like what I wanted to create, so I used them as my two main examples. One was written by Anne Cottringer, called *Eliot Jones, Midnight Superhero* (2009) and the other was *The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man* (2011) by Michael Choban. I found them both to be good examples because they fit the superhero picture book genre, but each was also unique, and there were differences between the two of them. I also felt that the best way to learn about the genre I was writing was to look at what I wanted to write. Now that I had these two different examples of a superhero picture book, I was able to reference them while using scholarly research to learn about the two genres separately. So, I began with looking at the superhero genre with my two examples by my side.

## Superheroes Throughout the Years

As I mentioned before, I found it important to look at what other authors had said about the genre as well as looking at examples. The two picture books that I was using as examples were useful, but I also wanted to learn more about the context of these stories. I decided to start at the beginning of superhero stories and look at their history of them in literature and popular media. In order to understand the use of superheroes in picture books, it is helpful to know how they have been used in other genres over the years. I was surprised to see that the superhero phenomenon has been around for quite some time and has evolved tremendously throughout its years. I found a lot about the history of superheroes from a book written by Alex S. Romagnoli and others: *Enter The Superheroes: American Values, Culture, And The Canon Of Superhero Literature* (2013). I learned that the first superheroes can be traced back to comic books. Also, these stories started becoming popular around the time of the Great Depression because newspaper comics were about all one could afford for entertainment. In fact, "the original intention of comic books was to entertain children and adolescents with fanciful stories cheaply produced on flimsy paper and covered with a glossy front" (Romagnoli 125). In the 1930s when these stories did become available to the public, "the country had never seen anything like it" (Romagnoli 9). I came to understand that not only did children love them, but adults did as well. I saw that parents not only loved superhero comics because of the fun adventures to read about, but for their educational value. Parents found that superhero stories were "a way to help the children learn about values and morals [parents] deem important" (Romagnoli 126). This seemed like a really important point in my research because a picture book with superheroes would probably play a similar role.

Now, superhero stories are maybe even more popular today than they were seventy years ago. There are toys, movies (and sequels), books, clothing, and even roller coasters based off of these characters. At almost every store I go to, I see a new product with some superhero on it. Part of the reason for these stories' success is that their "longevity can be attributed to their universality and reliability" (Romagnoli 15). What started out as an affordable form of entertainment in the Great Depression has become worth way more than a cheap newspaper comic today. After learning about the history, I had a much better understanding of superhero stories. After all, where and how something begins shapes it into what it is. Knowing all of this helped with making my own superhero story because the context of superheroes in comics impacts every genre that uses superheroes. By learning about the history, I was able to see that one of the reasons these stories are so popular and loved is because of how they focus on positive morals and values. With this knowledge, I knew that I had to include good values and morals in my own story because the audience would expect it.

## What Makes Up a Superhero Story?

The main important factor of a superhero story is, of course, the superhero, but what even makes a superhero a superhero? This was the next question I needed to answer to create my picture book, but it wasn't something that I could figure out in my scholarly research. Thus, to answer this question, I simply looked at the two examples of picture books that I mentioned earlier. In both stories, the superhero used a special ability to save the day and fight something/someone bad. In Choban's book, the main character was the superhero named Awesome Man, and he had these awesome powers like flying, super strength, and super grip. However, the main difference was that in Cottringer's book, the superhero, Eliot, did not have a supernatural power. He was just a normal kid, yet he was still a superhero. He still saved the day, but he used his mind to outsmart the bad guy. So, my question became whether a super power is a necessary element in a superhero story. I do not think so, but I do think they are a common element within the many different types of superhero stories. But the main element is having a "good" character that fights the "bad" and saves the world; after all, every superhero needs their villain. There is always the idea of good versus bad in children's stories, but it can be very complicated. In my examples, both Eliot and Awesome Man would save people from evil.

There is also another quality that superheroes usually have in common as well: their values. Values seem to be more important in the superhero genre than actual super powers. Even my scholarly research backed this up, because Romagnoli writes that "superheroes represent a set of timeless values; their motivation to do good, their passion for justice, and their opposition to evil are ageless" (18). These are all values that most Americans seem to strive for and want to be known for. In both my examples, each character wanted to be the good guy and save the town. Values seem to be the main component in the framework of this genre, not the actual super power, which seems to be a common misinterpretation. The values are what make superheroes so admirable to not only adults, but children too, and it was a combination of my scholarly research and analysis of examples that helped me understand this. Now that I had obtained a better understanding of some of the many parts of one side of my mashup of genres, it was time to do the same for picture books.

## What Makes Up a Picture Book?

Again, my first step was to read what scholars say about the picture book genre. According to an expert in picture books, Perry Nodelman, the actual definition of a picture book is "books intended for young children, which communicate information or tell stories through a series of many pictures combined with relatively slight texts or no texts at all" (vii). When I was trying to find scholarly sources on picture books, I asked an instructor of a children's literature course that I was taking what book to look at. I wanted to find the best book about picture books, so I figured that the best person to ask would be someone who knew a lot about picture books. She recommended a book written by Perry Nodelman, *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art Of Children's Picture Books* (1988). I realized that the main difference between a picture book and all other types of children's literature is the actual pictures. The pictures are very important, maybe even more important than the actual story. They "take up most of the space and bear the burden of conveying most of the information" (Nodelman viii).

To better understand this, I looked again at examples—this time at a couple of picture books that I just found from my mother's collection. One example that helped me understand how important pictures can be was Hervé Tullet's *Press Here* (2011). In this book, I noticed how the illustrations are "interactive," and without the illustrations, the text would make no sense. This was also true for my two superhero picture book examples. In each book, there were pictures that helped you truly understand the story and without them, you would be missing out. This proves that illustrations are critical to the actually stories told in picture books.

Another feature I noticed that makes picture books different is that children are often able to "read" them without actually reading the text. This means children who cannot even read would be able to enjoy these books without the help of an adult reader. By just looking at the pictures, they are able to make up stories in their mind that go along with the illustrations. Although it might not be the exact story that the author is telling, it is still a story. Also, it is a great way for children to use their imaginations. Again, this was something that Perry Nodelman wrote about, but it was something I could see in my examples as well and could remember from my EYC days of watching preschoolers with picture books. In this case, my research was a combination of scholarly sources, example analysis, and first hand observation of the genre. After all of my research, I knew that I needed to apply these ideas to my picture book as well. Since pictures were just as important as the words, maybe even more important, I knew that I needed to focus on my illustrations. I wanted anyone to be able to enjoy my book, even those who did not know how read. Knowing this, I thought my next step would be to gain a better understanding of what illustrations are.

## Illustrations

Illustrations are an important part of the format and layout of a picture book. From looking at all the picture books I personally collected, I realized that illustrations come in all different forms. They can be realistic, cartoons, stick figures, real pictures, or pretty much anything. They can also be colorful, not colorful, black and white; the list goes on and on. It all just depends on what the author or illustrator wants. Two examples of different types of illustrations from my own picture books are Robert McCloskey's *Make Way For Ducklings* (1996) and Eric Litwin and James Dean's *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons* (2012). In *Make Way For Ducklings* the drawings seem more realistic and are not colorful; they are all actually only one color, brown. In *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons*, the pictures are colorful and more cartoon-like. In my superhero picture book examples, I feel as though Eliot was a little more cartoonish in *Eliot Jones, Midnight Superhero*, and in *The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man*, Awesome Man was more realistic. There really is no limitation in the illustrations of not only picture books, but superhero picture books as well. As long as they are fun to look at and fit the story, a child will be able to picture what the characters look like and see the story come to life. There is so much flexibility with illustrations, which gave me a lot of freedom with how I wanted to create my book. I really liked this part of creating a picture book because there are so many different choices. My pictures could be black and white or colorful; the decision was up to me.

## Writing My Own Superhero Picture Book

After finishing all my research on what I was actually creating, I could finally begin my own children's superhero book. I decided to start just creating my book step by step. I figured that this would help me organize my thoughts better if I did not try to do everything at once. So, I made step one creating my character; after all, that is who my book is about.

## Step One: The Characters

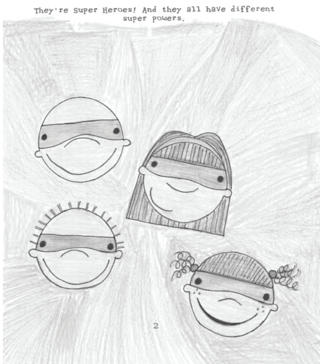


Figure 1: Superhero Family Illustration

After reading so much about superhero stories, I saw how important the characters really were, so the first thing I did was create my main character. Since my book was for kids, I wanted my main character to be a kid, whom I named Sammy. Sammy wasn't the only character though; I made a whole family of superheroes, just like the family from the movie *The Incredibles* (2004). My family was very similar to them because each family member had their own unique super power. I decided to do this because I really liked the movie, *The Incredibles*, and thought it would be fun to have more than one superhero in my story. Also, since my research showed me how important values and morals were to superhero stories and picture books, I thought that a family would be a good way to incorporate them. Ideal families are good examples of loving behavior and caring for others. Also, by having parents as characters in my story, I was able to have role model figures, especially for Sammy in the story. The parents were able to share their wisdom, and my readers were then able to learn the same lessons as Sammy by just reading the story. Now that I had my characters, I could begin writing my actual story.

## Step Two: The Story


Figure 2: Sammy the Superhero Cover

The main guideline I kept in mind while writing was what I was going to teach my audience, since I learned from my research that morals are an important part of a children's book and good values are important to superhero stories. Since I was creating a superhero picture book and morals and good values were important to both picture books and superhero stories, I made sure to focus on that while writing my story. So, I made sure that Sammy learned something by the end of the book. After Sammy tries to fight the bad guys by himself, he realizes that it is always okay to ask for help. Although this lesson is very simple, it is a good moral for children to learn.

## Step Three: The Illustrations

After I finally finished writing my actual story, I broke up the texts into different pages and left a space for illustrations. Then it was time to bring the words to life with pictures. Since I am not that great of an artist, I asked my sister, Kara, to illustrate the book for me. The main purpose of illustrations is to help tell the story, as I mentioned before in my research. It was a very interesting experience working with my sister. First of all, I was giving her a lot of freedom; I did not give her many guidelines or restrictions. The only thing I told her was that I did want the characters to be more cartoon-like than realistic. A lot of the picture books I looked at as examples during my research had cartoon images, and I liked that. After growing up seeing her art all around the house, I trusted her with my book. I gave her my story and for each page she drew a sketch of what she would like to create. Once I saw all of her sketches, made changes, and approved it, she then drew and colored the final pictures. Since a good amount of authors have a different person illustrate their book for them, I am assuming my experience was pretty similar. It is interesting seeing the pictures of your characters you had in your head come to life, especially when someone else is creating them. Once my illustrations were done, it was time to share my book.

## Step Four: Sharing My Book

As part of our class project, we had to actually share our story with our class at an open mic night. Although my book is for a children's audience, not a group of college kids, I still read it like a children's book. I made sure to show the pictures, just like I would if I were to share the story with a group of children. Now that I have a finished children's book, I have so many different possibilities for what I could do with it. For now, I just want to share it with people I know and my community. I could read it at the library, share it with the children at my church, read it in a classroom here in town, or even go back to EYC in high school and leave it in the bookshelf there. There are so many options for where this book could go, but the important thing was that I did not just let it sit there. After all the hard work I put into *Sammy the Superhero*, I want people to get to read it and experience it.

## The Aftermath

Who knew that one final from high school would become a much bigger idea and project in college, but I now feel as though I have a better understanding of the superhero themed picture book genre. I learned that not only is producing a superhero story in a picture book complex, but there is so much more to both superhero stories and picture books than I thought. I also realized that in order to try a new kind of writing, it requires all sorts of research—in my case, combining scholarly sources to learn about how experts view the genre with my own examination into examples. I would not consider myself a children's author, but writing my own picture book was a fun experience, and I am pretty proud of it. Maybe someday I will actually try to publish my book or write a new one for my future classroom when I am a teacher. But for now, I am just going to continue my interest in children's literature and try to actually complete my elementary education degree. Maybe a few years from now I will bring out *Sammy the Superhero* and be able to actually use it in my own classroom. Now, like most pictures books finish...

**The End**

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# Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap

Written by Angela Sheets
Illustrated by Daniel Sheets

In this children's story style article, Sheets explores her process of researching and learning to navigate the Bloomington-Normal bus system. She discusses how her awareness of her own learning process helps her adapt to the new situation. Additionally, she examines how the various genres in the Connect-Transit Bus System make the bus-riding activity possible.

## Preface

When I was an undergrad, I had a visual literacy textbook that was particularly dense. Talking to my peers, I discovered that half the class wasn't even doing the reading . . . that is, until the day we were assigned an article by Scott McCloud. McCloud's article was about comics, and the whole thing was written as a comic strip. Everybody read that one.

I've heard people say that genres evolve because they are the best possible way to mediate (or make possible) a particular action. I don't think this is always true. Textbook chapters are probably effective, but they aren't always the most entertaining way to spread ideas. McCloud's chapter was informative *and* entertaining. It did the work of a textbook chapter, even if it didn't look like your average textbook chapter.

But, McCloud didn't <u>subvert</u>* the genre norms just because he could. Since he was writing about comics, it made sense to *show* his ideas rather than just *tell* his audience about them. Conforming to traditional genre standards would have held him back.

When I set out to write this *Grassroots* article, I knew I could present my research in the style of a "traditional" *Grassroots* article, but I wasn't sure this was the best option. My story about learning to ride the bus reminded me of children's stories about learning basic daily activities (tying your shoes, washing your face, riding the bus safely . . . ). Having read a lot of these types of books growing up, I was already pretty familiar with the conventions of this genre. I knew I would need to invent a protagonist the readers could relate to. This character would begin the story not knowing how to do something, but through trial and error (and perhaps with a little help), the character would eventually succeed at doing something new. If I was following the children's story genre conventions, I would also need pictures, somewhat sparse text, and an appropriate font. Since this is a journal article, I still needed to cite my research, so I opted to include an "acknowledgments" section at the end because I had seen such sections at the end of children's stories I encountered in the past.

"Angela Rides the Bus" is and isn't a children's story. Although it conforms to the genre conventions of a children's story, my primary audience is made up of adults learning to add something very complicated to their daily routines—genre/CHAT based writing research. Just as stories helped us learn to tie our shoes (which was very complicated business at the time), I figured a good story with pictures might help me illustrate my initial uptake of genre studies and CHAT. Perhaps this familiar genre would help my readers to take up these ideas too.

*Underlined words throughout this article are listed in the glossary.

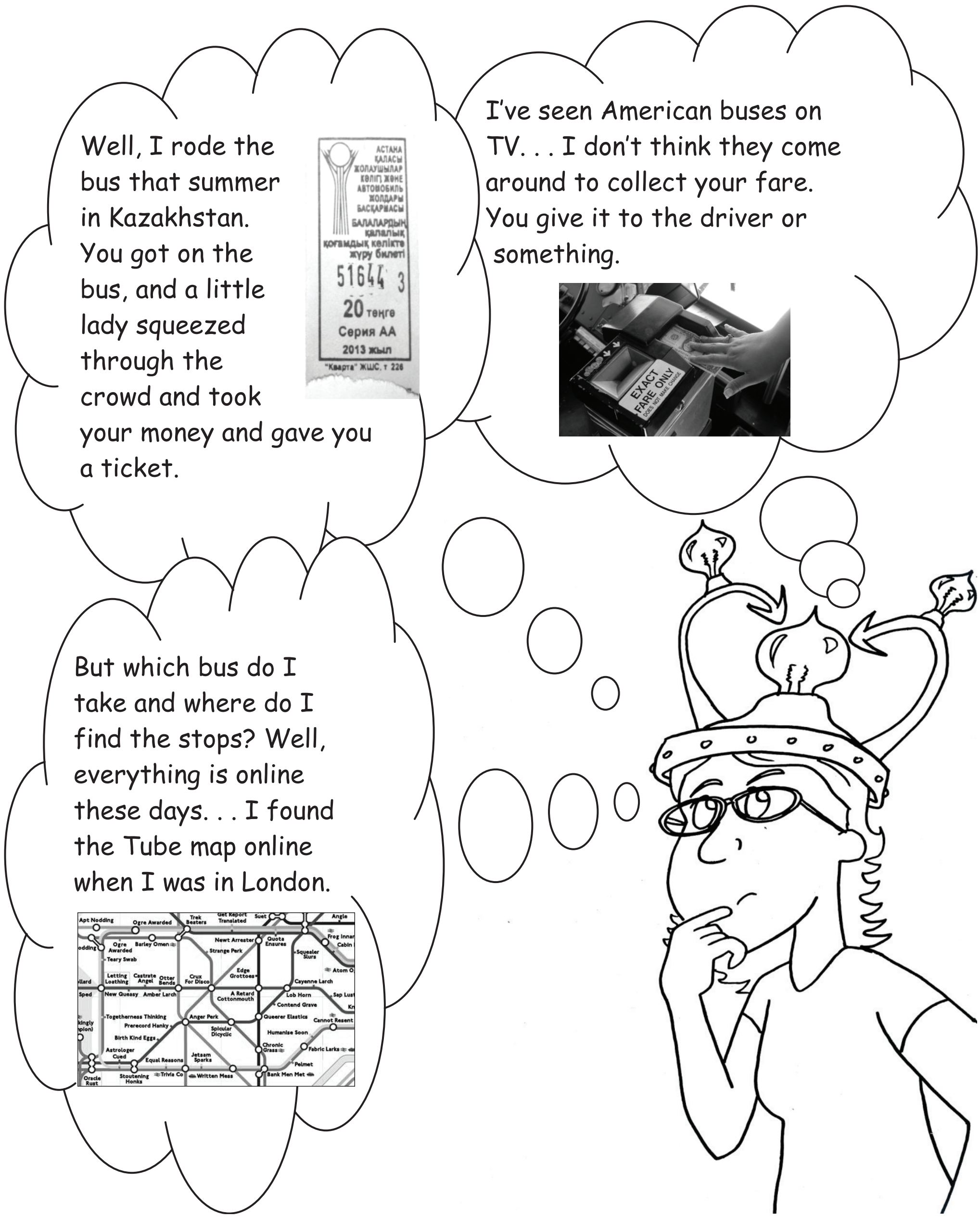
Angela doesn't like driving.

She was tragically born without a sense of direction, and her version of traffic is "Oh no! There's another car on the road!"


When Angela came to ISU, she found out that one of the magical properties of her ISU Redbird ID card was free access to the Bloomington-Normal Connect-Transit Bus System.

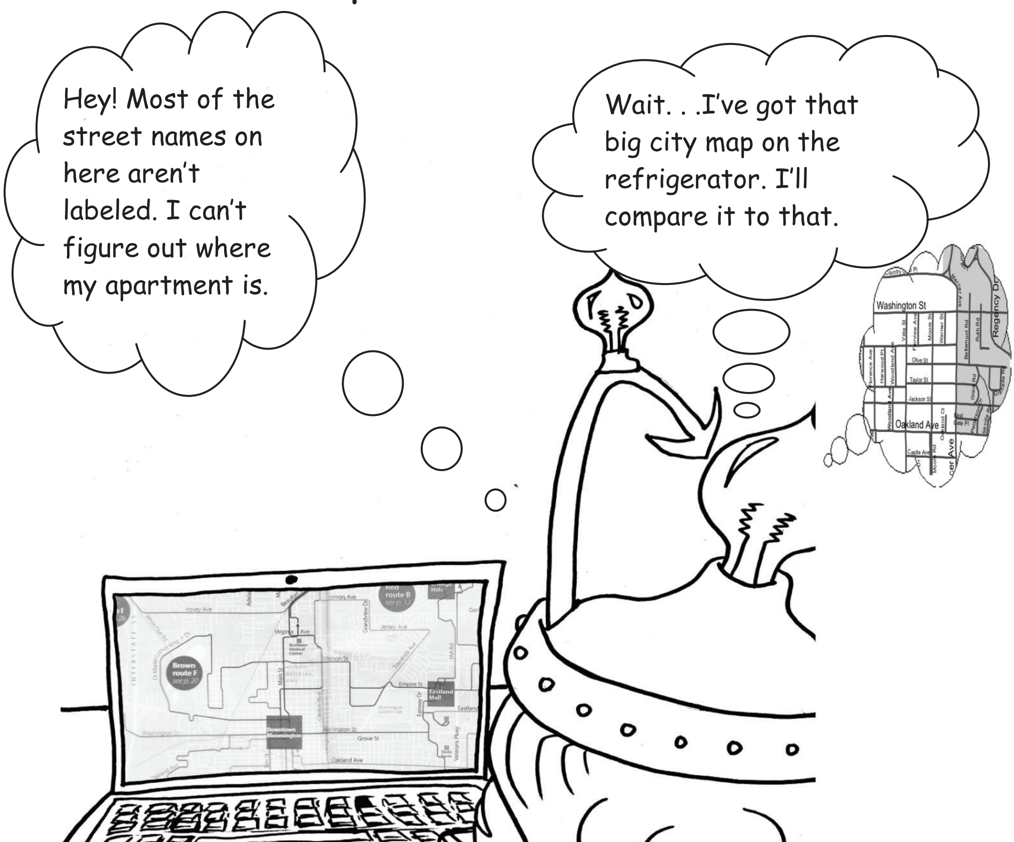
Angela was a newbie to the Connect-Transit system, so she put on her metacognitive thinking cap.

First, she thought about antecedent genres.



The metacognitive thinking cap told Angela that she probably needed to research.

She got on the Connect-Transit website and found a route map. But it was kinda hard to read.




After lots of pensive chin-stroking and squinting at tiny font, Angela figured out that two different buses came near(ish) to her apartment and then went to campus.

It was time to try actually taking the bus.

Angela had figured out through careful observation (a.k.a. looking out her window) that the buses were labeled.


So she stood at the bus stop until she saw the Red B coming. Her heart raced as she raised her arm and waved her hand like she'd seen people do on TV. . .

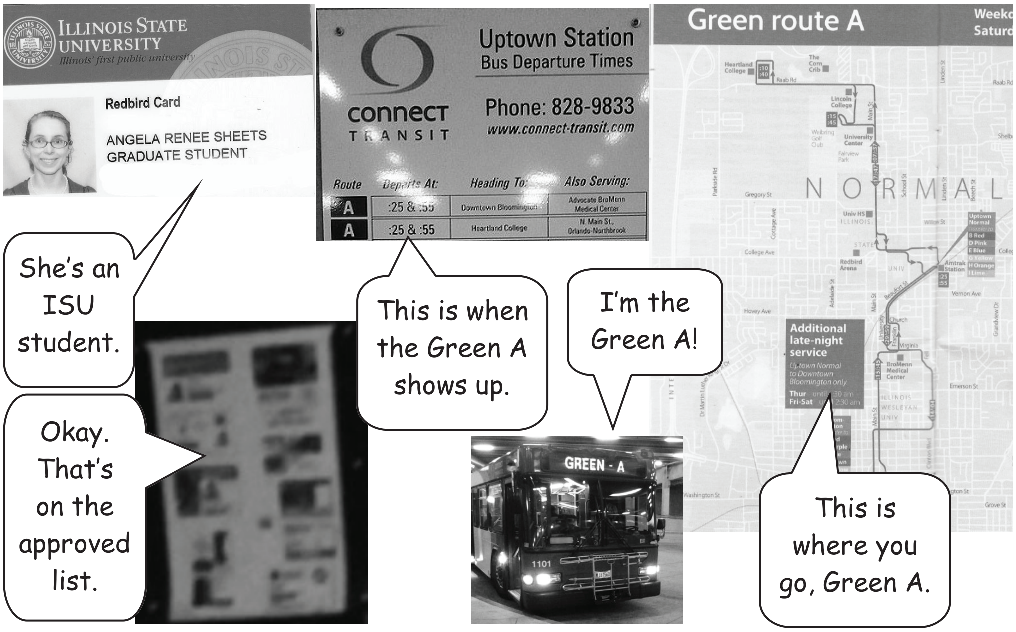
. . .And the bus stopped for her!

Once she was on the bus, Angela read the signs and observed the other people to figure out what to do.

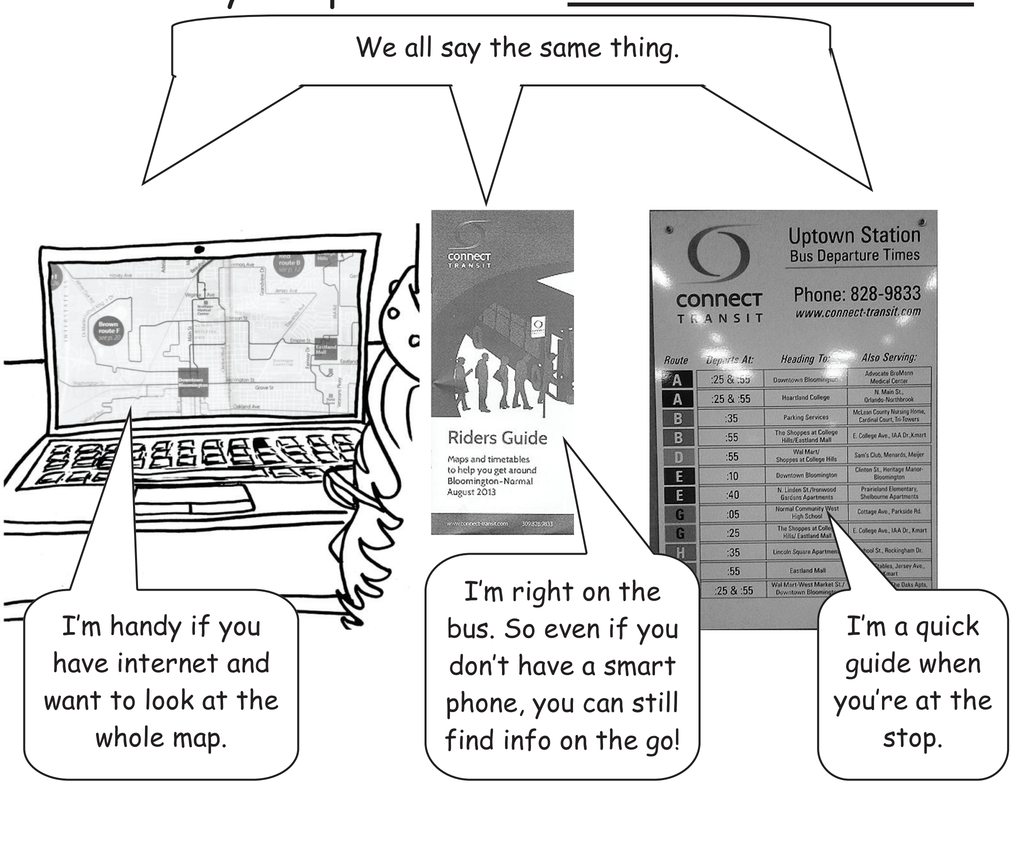
Having forgotten to take off her metacognitive thinking cap (because it was so stylish and went with everything), Angela started realizing how many genres went into taking the bus, and how they impacted everyone's behavior.

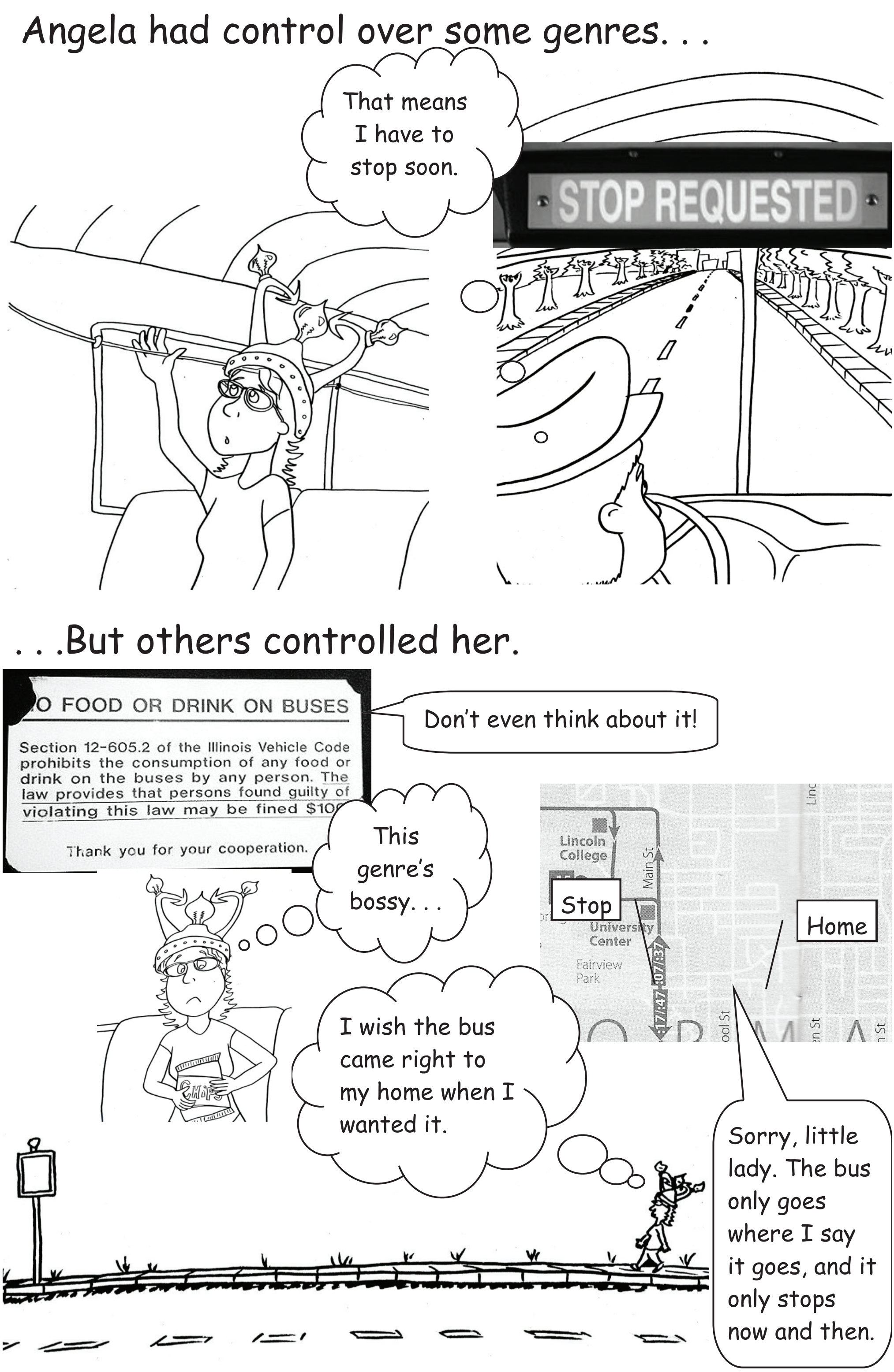
It was a complex <u>activity system</u>!

# Some of the genres talked to one another. . .




# . . .And they adapted to the <u>rhetorical situations</u>.



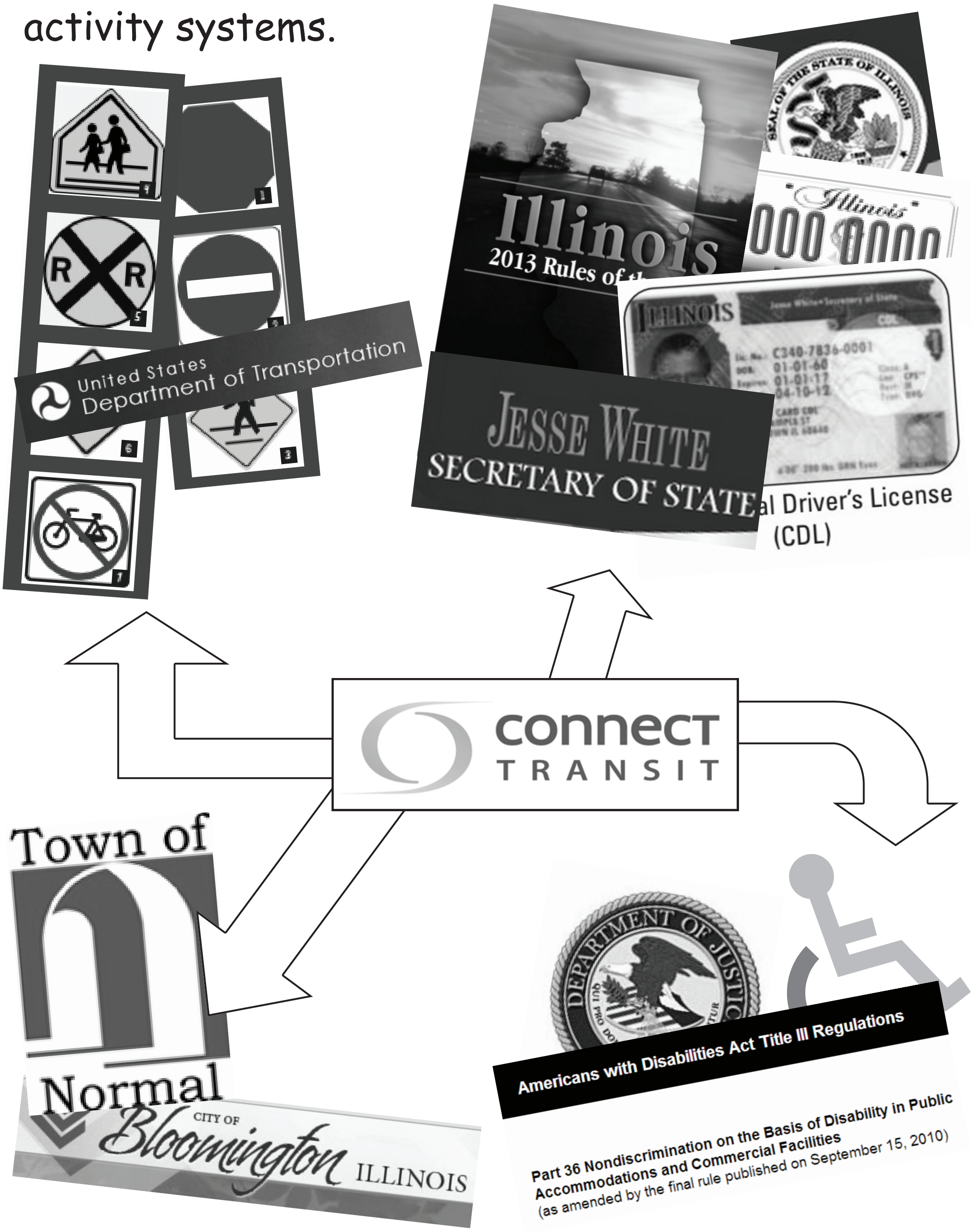

Angela had control over some genres. . .
That means I have to stop soon.
STOP REQUESTED
. . .But others controlled her.
O FOOD OR DRINK ON BUSES
Section 12-605.2 of the Illinois Vehicle Code prohibits the consumption of any food or drink on the buses by any person. The law provides that persons found guilty of violating this law may be fined $10
Thank you for your cooperation.
Don't even think about it!
This genre's bossy. . .
CHIPS
Lincoln College
Main St
Stop
University Center
Fairview Park
Home
I wish the bus came right to my home when I wanted it.
Sorry, little lady. The bus only goes where I say it goes, and it only stops now and then.

Some of the genres were taken more seriously than others.



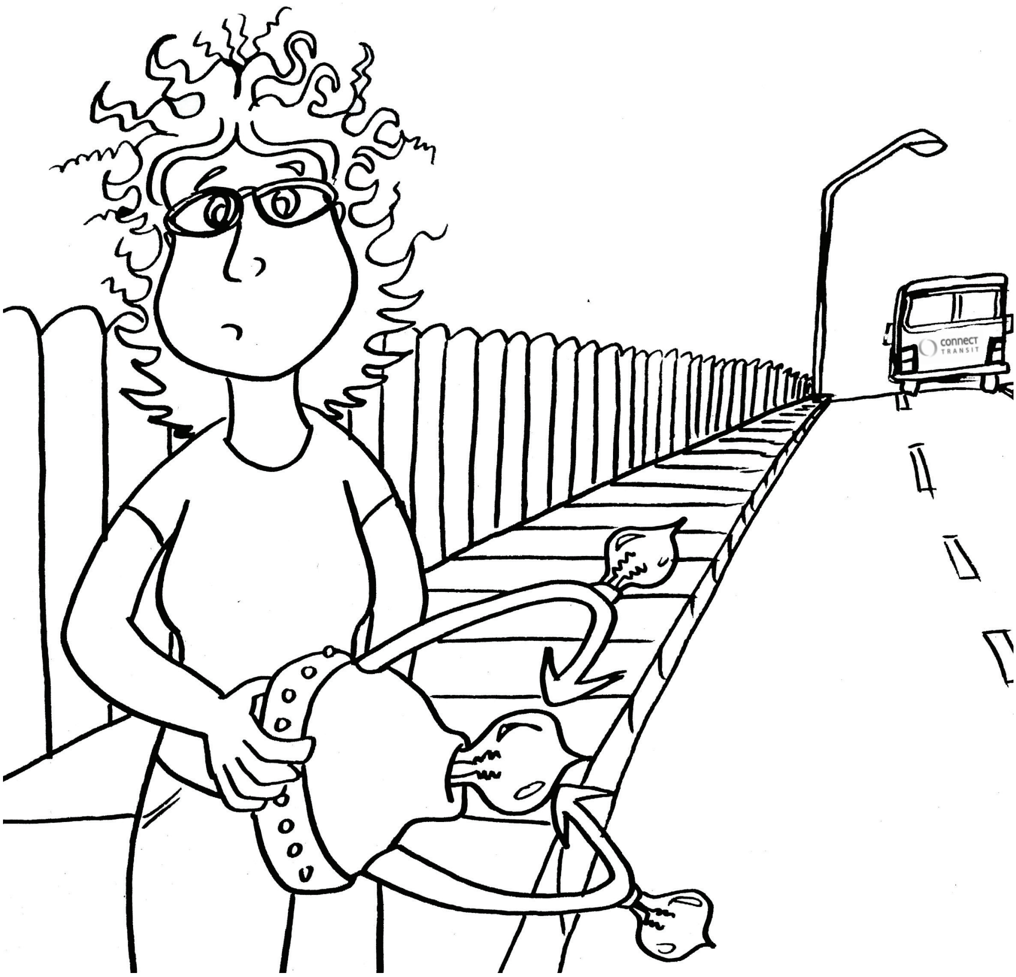
And they weren't neutral.


All the genres worked together with passengers, bus drivers, and buses to make trips across town possible. Plus, the Connect-Transit activity system worked together with lots of other activity systems.



After a while, Angela metacognized herself into an <u>existential crisis</u>.

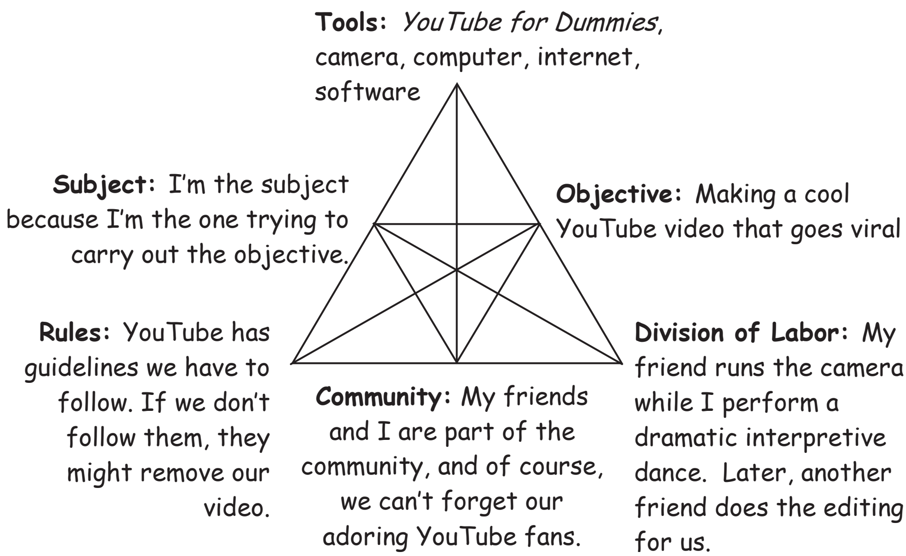
So she took off the metacognitive thinking cap. . .




. . . And dealt with the hat hair.

## Glossary

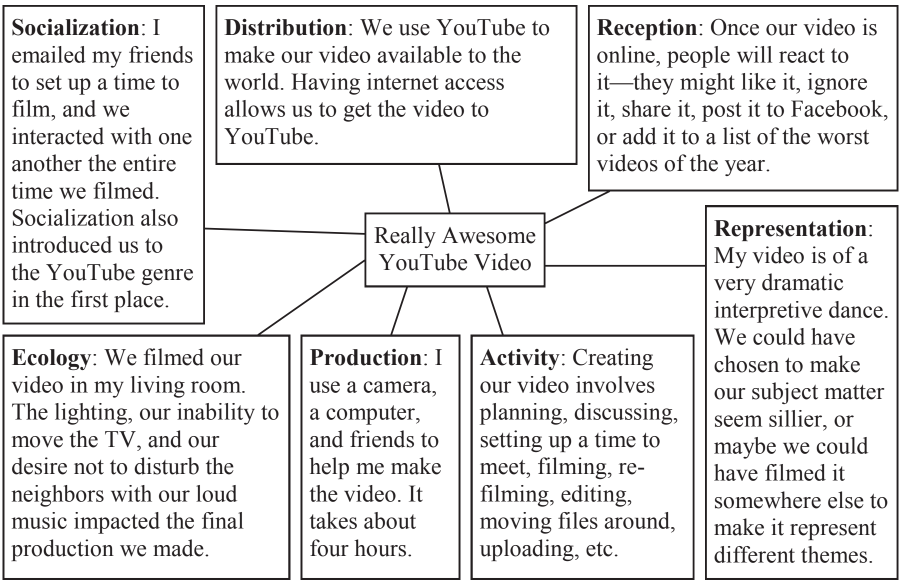
**Activity System** – An activity system is all the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together to achieve a particular objective. For example, if my objective is to make a cool YouTube video, I might need a book called YouTube for Dummies, a camera, a friend to co-star with me or help me film, video-editing software, internet access, a computer, etc. All of these objects/people/ideas work together to make my objective (the YouTube video) possible. If you remove any of them, the activity doesn't happen. The diagram below illustrates this:




**Antecedent Genre** – When we enter new research/writing situations, we often think back to situations we've been in before that seem similar. The texts we produced in those past situations are our antecedent genres. We think about how we dealt with the earlier situation and how we could possibly deal with the new situation in similar ways. For example, if my biology professor asks me to write a lab report, I might think back to lab write-ups I did in high school and try to apply the techniques I used there to this new situation . . . which may or may not work.

**CHAT definition 1** – CHAT stands for Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. Activity Theory is an exploration of how people, objects, and ideas work together to carry out objectives (see Activity System for an example). But the "Cultural" and "Historical" part talks about how the objects, ideas, and genres we use reflect certain cultural values at a certain point in history. The fact that I made grilled cheese for dinner, for example, reflects my cultural values in this historical moment . . . I don't have much time, so I made something quick . . . I'm not vegan so eating cheese is okay with me… there's not a global cheese shortage on, so I could afford to buy it . . . I eat it without a fork because that's a cultural norm for grilled cheeses . . . etc.

**CHAT definition 2** – Some folks find it easier to understand CHAT if they break it down into seven different sub-concepts: production, distribution, reception, representation, ecology, activity, and socialization. Let's revisit the example of making an YouTube video and look at it through these sub-concepts:




**Existential Crisis** – The mental breakdown that results when something forces you to question the very foundations of life, the universe, and everything. Like that time you saw your kindergarten teacher at the grocery store and found out that he or she didn't live at the school all the time.

**Genre** – There are many ways of defining genre. I have three favorites:

1. A typified response to a recurring situation . . . for example, when I apply for a job (the recurring situation since I haven't found a single job that seemed to stick yet), I write a resume (the typified—or typical—response to the situation). A less typified response to the I-need-to-apply-for-a-job situation would be sending the employer a very desperate "please please hire me!" letter via carrier pigeon.

2. A genre is a text that makes a particular action possible (or impossible). For example, if I want to send my husband to the grocery store to get our food for the week (and make sure that he doesn't just buy a week's worth of macaroni and cheese), I might make a grocery list telling him what to buy. On the flip-side, my landlord's no-pet policy makes it impossible (or at least a very bad idea) for me to own a puppy.

3. A genre is a "stable-for-now" category. As communities change and need to carry out different actions (or the same actions in different ways), the

genres they use to make those actions possible often evolve. If you looked at a take-out menu from fifteen years ago, you might see the restaurant's address and a phone number. These days, that same take-out menu might also include a QR code, a website URL, and an invitation to "like" the restaurant on Facebook or follow it on Twitter.

**Metacognitive** – Metacognition is just a fancy way of saying thinking about your own thinking. I liked to put on my metacognitive thinking cap any time I think it might be useful to figure out *how* I should try to learn something rather than just *what* I should be learning. For example, instead of just thinking, "I need to figure out how to make grilled cheese," I might think, "There are YouTube videos that teach you how to do everything. I can learn how to make grilled cheese from YouTube. I've used YouTube to make other foods, and I'm usually able to follow their instructions pretty well."

**Rhetorical Situation** – In simple terms, the rhetorical situation is the who, what, where, when, why, and how that impact your writing/communication. If I wanted to tell my mum I'd arrived home safely from her house, for example, I might text her. My goal is to in- form her (the who) at her home (the where) that I'm home (the what). But because it's 10 at night (the when), I text her (the how) since she might be asleep already, and I don't want to wake her (the why).

**Subvert** – When you subvert a genre, you purposefully break some of the conventions or rules of that genre. Subverting a genre can be risky because people might take it to mean that you don't understand the rules of the genre, or they might not like that you're breaking the rules. However, bending the rules of a genre sometimes lets you do something original and unexpected that catches your audience's attention more than playing by the rules.

**Uptake** – Uptake is the process we go through to "take up" a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it—sometimes we don't!). Our uptakes are highly individual because we all have different past experiences that impact the way we see the world. Say your instructor comes in and says, "There will be an ice cream social for our class on Friday afternoon." One student thinks, "I bet there will be waffle cones!" Another thinks, "Awesome! Class must be cancelled." Still another laments, "Ugh, forced socialization!" Notice that the instructor didn't say any of those things, but because of each students' past experiences or beliefs about ice cream socials, they take up the news to mean very different things.

## Acknowledgments

A special thanks to the following for the their help with graphics in this article . . .

- Daniel Sheets, master illustrator
- www.connect-transit.com
- www.dot.gov
- www.cityblm.org
- www.cyberdriveillinois.com
- www.normal.org

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# How Many Presidential Scholars Does it Take to Read a Bus Map? Ten

Nora Fredstrom, Fawna Goldi-Wasson,
Hannah Kehe, Mike Lisack,
Jennifer Morley, Cassie Myroth,
Beau Ott, Laura Rocco,
Katie Tollakson, and Wes Ward

This collaborative article is an exploration of student interactions with the genre of maps and the qualities that make a map effective for a student demographic. Upon further investigation, the authors concluded that a hybrid approach was necessary to format maps in a way that is useful for students.

## Woeful Tales of Travel

In late September, just one month after beginning her college experience in the Bloomington-Normal community, Illinois State University freshman Laura tried to go to the AT&T store to buy a new phone. Laura did not have a car on campus and had no idea how to get to the store. With no other option, Laura was forced to take the Connect Transit bus. She was resistant to this form of transportation because, as a navigation novice, she was quite convinced she would get lost. As a class, we tried to help Laura by looking at the community bus map together, assuming our killer ACT scores would mean we could easily decipher a map. Instead, our group of Presidential Scholars stared perplexed at the web of neon-colors that was the community bus map. We realized that while many students need to travel off campus, many do not know how to find the tools to help them navigate the transit system or decipher its information. We asked ourselves: why was this map particularly ineffective and what could potentially make it better?

 

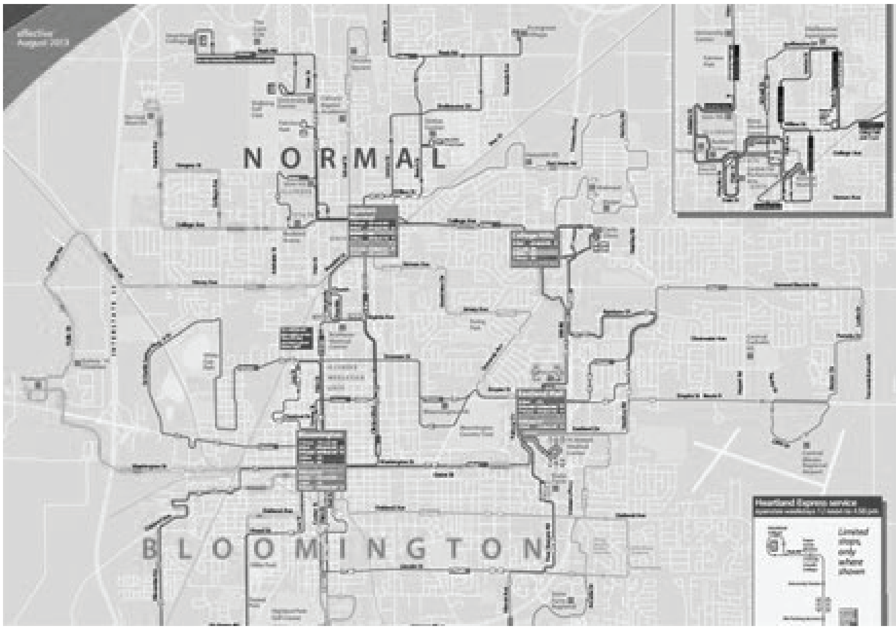


Figure 1: Official Connect Transit Map for Bloomington/Normal Routes

## So Now What?

We needed to figure out how to navigate Bloomington-Normal through the Connect Transit bus system, but the map provided by the bus company was doing more to disorient the ten of us than help us get to our destination. We decided to take some time to research the ways in which the university and its students interact with the bus system. Was it just us struggling to read the map? Does the university know that students have difficulties with it? Do they care? Did the bus company conspire to make it so difficult to read that we would not use the free transportation with student ID? We decided that in order to answer any of these questions, we first needed to figure out exactly what and/or where the problem was. Since this was a daunting task, we decided to divide our English 145.12 Composition for Presidential Scholars class into groups before we started. We went with a committee-style division of the class to ensure that all relevant topics would be covered within the project. These committees focused on four specific areas—Survey, Sustainability, Management, and Research—and came together to share their findings. We conducted our research within several ISU departments and the Connect Transit Company, and we collected a vast amount of information pulled from online research, peer surveys, and interviews with public transit officials within the university.

Perhaps the most enlightening data we used in our study was the research projects given to us by our instructor from her English 101 Composition class.

This is another class that focuses on the ideas of genre and composition, also taught by our instructor. She asked her students to travel to a specific location using the bus map and other resources and to present their experience through written maps and directions. We felt that it would be valuable to look at what students already knew about mapmaking and directions. These projects from the other class provided us with insight into what parts of the transit map genre students could navigate effectively, and what parts they needed more help on and could be clarified. Some students drew maps by hand, some provided only written directions, some simply took selfies, and others used Google Earth to find route images. Despite the wide range of genres used, all were confusing and provided insufficient information to help us understand their directions, but the overarching message that we gathered from each of them was invaluable. After looking at these projects, it was clear that the average college student was unfamiliar with the genre of transit maps and not comfortable giving directions.

## Science of Mapmaking

Next, we decided it was important to define what a transit map is supposed to do in order to investigate and solve the issues that students have with understanding maps. According to Dr. Himley, a professor in the Illinois State University Geography/Geology department, a good map "convey[s] enough of the right information in a concise way." When we first pulled up the Connect Transit map, our initial reaction was confusion. Dr. Himley took a few minutes to look at it and determined that we were right to be confused. It was difficult to read, lacked important location labels, and the insets made it impossible to tell where the bus actually stopped. One of the positive aspects of the map that we identified was the arrows indicating departure, transit and arrival times throughout each route. These arrows are useful for students who want to closely plan how long a trip will take or how they will transfer routes.

We decided to look at maps of transit systems on other college campuses to analyze their map techniques. What we found was that there is no such example of a perfect map. There was nothing we came across that incorporated all the relevant information (arrival times, street names, important buildings, etc.) without feeling cluttered and confusing. Each map had different strengths and weaknesses, but all seemed to fall flat as to what we felt students needed.

One map example we analyzed was the bus map for Indiana University. Unlike the Bloomington-Normal map, which suffered from a lack of side

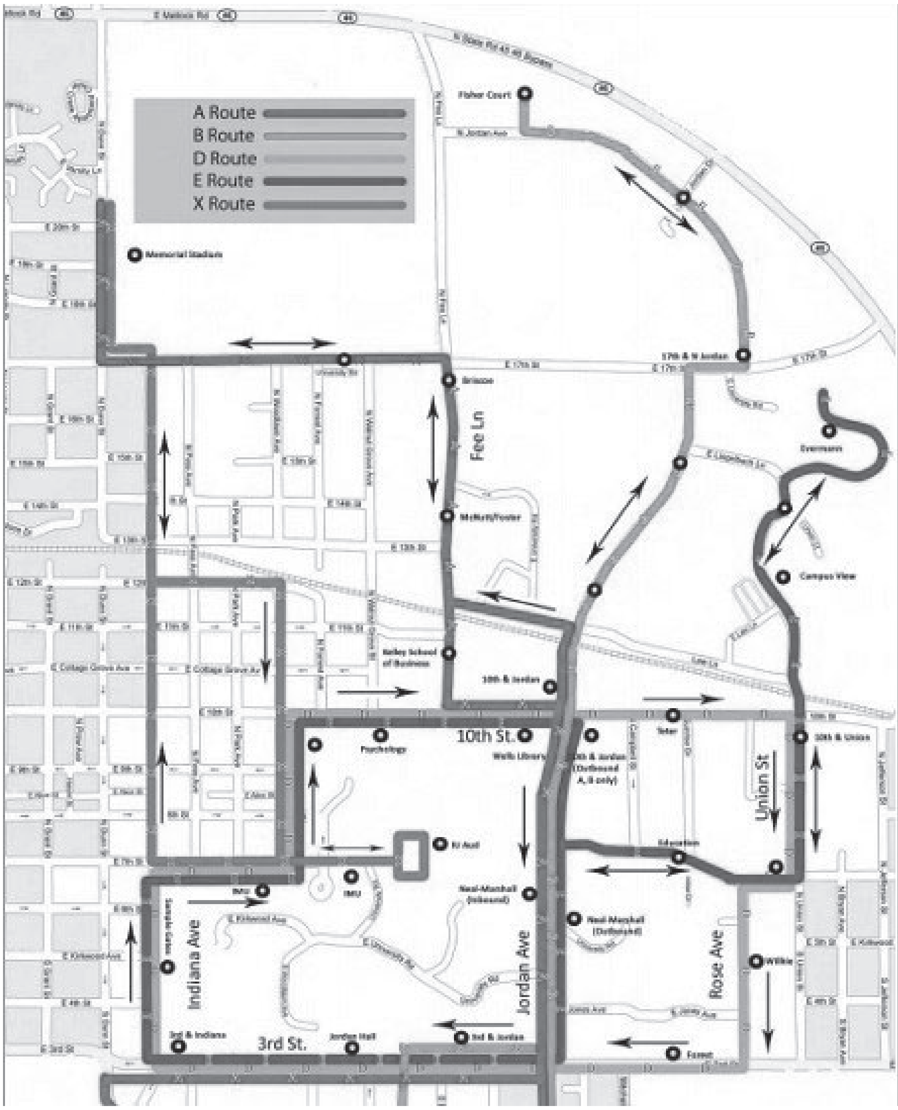


Figure 2: The Indiana University Bus Map

street names, the map for Indiana University identified every single street in the area, making it easier for students to keep track of exactly where they were going. This map also identified many on-campus locations that are probably of interest to students, such as academic buildings. In comparison to the Bloomington-Normal map, however, this map lacked arrival times throughout the routes to help students plan.

From looking at these and other such transit maps, we determined a set of criteria for what makes a good map. Good transit maps need to show not only specific routes, but also side streets and nearby places of interest. They should also indicate the relative times of departure and arrival to provide for accurate planning. We also noticed that certain university websites had online interactive maps that provided isolated directions to a particular place. Even with all of this information, maps can be difficult to decipher because too much clutter makes the graphics cramped and hard on the eyes. Based on all of this gathered information, we came to the conclusion that a simple map was not going to cut it to help students; they needed more information than just a map by itself to use the bus. We realized that integration of another genre or several genres would be required. The antecedent genres that we needed to analyze were not only maps, as we initially thought, but also written directions, interactive websites, and video/audio components.

## Generating Genre

After considering both what we considered a "good" map and students' ideas of maps and directions, we questioned if the majority of our generation was able to interpret traditional transit maps. Since most students rely on technology such as apps, GPS, and Google Maps, they don't often need the skills of knowing how to interpret an old-fashioned map and figuring out directions. Smartphone apps can be accessed anywhere, and GPS systems can be programmed to find multiple routes based on traffic patterns. Students have antecedent knowledge of genres that are interactive and respond to information that they input, an experience they cannot have with a paper map. Their antecedent knowledge of maps works on the assumption that the map will respond to them based on the information they input. They are unable to have this experience with a static map. Based on the experiences of other students at ISU that we gathered through the previously referenced research group and student surveys, we determined that the bus maps are difficult to use for two main reasons: 1) the maps are written in a way that is inaccessible for this audience and, 2) students are unfamiliar with the genre of transit maps.

At this point, we were somewhat at a standstill. We knew that maps are helpful, but the Connect Transit map was not conveying sufficient directional information to students. We explored options other than making a map; we wanted to create something that was simple to understand and contained all the information necessary for students to travel around Bloomington-Normal using public transportation.

It was at this point that we started to use Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to determine how to best incorporate different genres into a cohesive tool. CHAT argues that writers are influenced in their work by a variety of factors that include their environment, knowledge of antecedent genres, and their personal experience. We knew we were writing to students, so we needed to consider what knowledge and skills they possess and could utilize. The English 101 research showed us that students are not strong in deciphering maps and directions, but we knew from personal experience that they are increasingly comfortable with navigating online and using interactive web resources. We specifically focused on where CHAT looked at production, distribution, reception, and socialization of new genres. We decided that if we could produce transit maps and directions in a way that students have been socialized to understand and appreciate, they could be better received and distributed by the target audience.

Our first thought when coming up with alternative ways of giving directions was to use the materials that were already in place for the Connect Transit system. We discussed using their bus route map as a base and including on the map specific locations that students would want to go. However, we decided against this option because the public transit bus map is, in our opinion, too cluttered already. Adding a few locations to the map would only make it more difficult to decipher. We then discussed the option of creating our own simplified version of the current bus map and printing brochures to give to students. This option was a closer fit, but we concluded that it would be frustrating to receive a brochure that only had a few places to go because nothing else could fit onto the piece of paper. We also wanted to do something digital, since students tend to be technologically inclined. This brought us back to the Connect Transit website. The company has an app that allows users to track their bus. The app includes the actual route maps, so that it can be used as a reference anywhere. This further solidified our desire to create something accessible and applicable to current technology. However, nobody in our group had created an app before, and with the time restraint on the project, we concluded that an app was not quite the correct genre either.

After these deliberations, we took a step back and tried to determine the positives and negatives of the genre of transit maps. Our research indicated that students prefer having maps in order to visualize their route and destination, but they also benefit from step-by-step instructions, similar to those provided by MapQuest or Google Maps. Our class was familiar with these antecedent genres and knew that someone could plug in their current location and the address of their desired destination, and the website would produce step-by-step instructions alongside a map. Unfortunately, we discovered that Google Maps does not provide directions for bus maps in the Bloomington-Normal community. We still thought, however, that it was a useful resource for looking at side streets and nearby places as well as its Google Earth feature. Through many discussions, we decided on creating some sort of hybrid with maps and step-by-step directions.

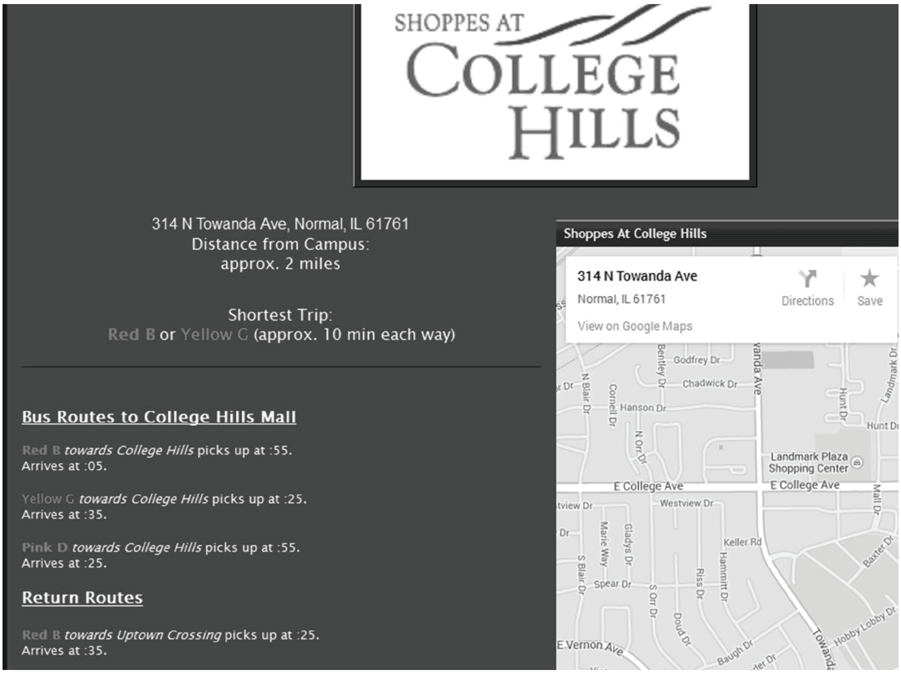


Figure 3: A Sample Page of our Website Showing Routes to College Hills Mall and an Interactive Google Map

## Website Work

Ultimately, we determined that making a website would be the best way to present this hybrid, since doing so would allow us to create our own platform while utilizing existing technology. Websites are simple enough to design and maintain; we would be able to do every part of it ourselves. We would be able to link our website to the Connect Transit site as well as the sites of our destinations. It was also important to incorporate existing technology that students had antecedent knowledge of and use as many pre-created maps as possible. Our goal was not to rewrite the maps, but rather decipher them and condense our conclusions into short, user-friendly directions. One of the students in our class also knew from a previous project that Google has a website building tool that is free and user friendly, and could also integrate Google Maps onto the pages. We explored several parent domains for our website such as *Blogger* and the personal blog space provided by ilstu.edu to every student. However, these sites did not seem to lend themselves to the creation of this project. Google also was the only site that could integrate an interactive map feature into its pages. Ultimately, we decided to build our website through the Google platform. It offered a blank template that would suit our project and allowed multiple managers so that each of us could edit it and add our personal research. It was easy for us to insert Google maps and directions, consequently capitalizing on pre-existing technology. Once we decided on this forum to present our findings, we were on our way towards sharing what we had learned with the students of ISU.

The next task for us was to actually design the website and organize everything so that it would be as user friendly as possible. We knew that making maps and giving directions to our target audience would not be an easy task, so it was somewhat difficult to decide how to organize the website. We explored the Connect Transit website and noticed that it only provided maps for each route, and that it was up to students to figure out how to get to specific places using these maps. We wanted to provide clearer instructions not only over a route, but also to specific places that students might want to go. What we settled on was fairly simple: we chose to use very basic designs in hopes that people would find the website easy to use. On every page, the user can mouse over the tabs on the top of the page that allow them to select a more specific category of what they might be looking for. For example, if a person wanted to find something fun or exciting to do, he or she could select the tab labeled for recreation and then be taken to a whole new page with places to go. On each destination page, we listed all the bus routes that would get students to that place. Additionally, we tagged the bus routes at the bottom of each page so that users can then click on any tag and be taken to related pages. In short, the website allows users to easily explore different destinations that may fall along the same route as the original point of interest. These different search options provide users with many ways to access the information they want and decide which form is most helpful to them. With all of these pages completed, we needed some way to put our own unique touch on the website.

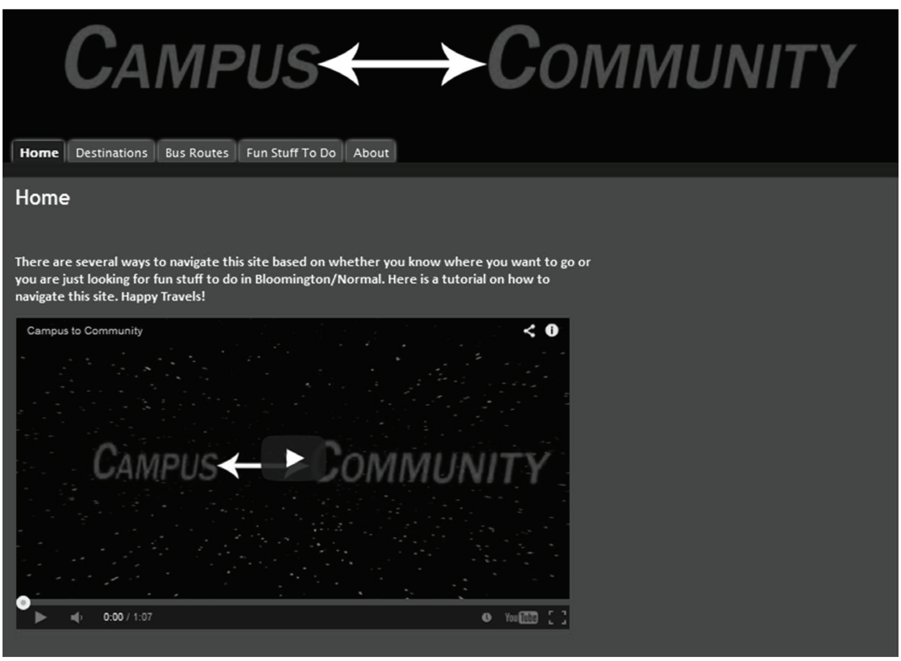


Figure 4: The Finished Tutorial Video on the Home Page of the Website

After organizing our site, we noticed that the format was extremely boring. We decided that if students were to see just text and a white background, they wouldn't be compelled to use the site. For this reason, we decided there was a need for color. None of the preset background color options were appealing to us, so we thought they wouldn't be for other students. Therefore, we decided to create our own color scheme and base it off the school's colors because we thought it would be more attractive to students. We also wanted to convey the information students need to know in the most concise way possible. Usually, if students see big blocks of text, they are less inclined to read it. This is also why, instead of typing out formal instructions on how to navigate our site, we made a tutorial video. One of the Presidential Scholars in our class had previous experience with making and editing YouTube videos and knew that it is a popular medium for students to use. Most students would much rather watch a short video than read instructions, so we kept it short in order not to lose their attention. This still left each destinations page bland with only text and a Google Maps image. In order to add some excitement, we decided to put each destination's logo at the top. This allowed for more color and broke up the straight text. To spice up each bus route's page, a map of the city with the highlighted bus route and arrival times was placed on each page. On the "Bios" subpage, we added pictures of our class to break up the monotony of the words. We placed a Wordle image on the "Home" page because we had too much empty space. Overall, it is important for the site to be creative, colorful, and engaging to our audience so that they feel more compelled to use it.

One of the biggest challenges we faced during website creation was how to write the "About" page. We struggled to concisely summarize our purpose without boring readers with huge chunks of text. We knew from other "About" pages on websites we had visited that this page is meant to convey crucial information about the purpose and origin of the site. This page also needed to answer some of the critical CHAT questions of "who, what, when, where, why, and how" this new genre was organized and created. We decided to organize our page with these question words as section headers. This served the dual purpose of streamlining the page's look while also organizing information in a helpful way for users. We limited "who," "what," "when," and "where" to one sentence each, since they only require simple answers. Our answer to "why" was also limited because we felt that the reasoning was fairly obvious: to travel in the Bloomington-Normal community. We focused most heavily on the question of "how," since the focus of this project was to do writing research in a particular genre. We wanted to articulate the steps we took in this process and some of the assumptions we were working under. At the bottom of the page, we placed a link that takes website users to our individual bios. Just as the "Presidential Scholars" link in the "who" section provides more information about the program we are all a part of, we thought that adding individual bios made the website more personal. Who better to relate to students trying to navigate the Bloomington-Normal area than other students? The website is meant to be a connection between the campus and the community, and so the more personal the website feels while still maintaining professionalism, the better.

## Writing Wrap-Up

This research endeavor provided us with valuable insight about several key aspects of writing. As we went from analyzing the shortcomings of the bus map to creating a website to remedy these issues, we learned that writing is flexible and often guides ideas in new directions. We also found that understanding the audience influences the writing genre. We discovered that a transit map was in fact the right genre; however, it was presented ineffectively. The solution was simple. We determined that students have difficulty reading the bus map because it is not a genre with which they are familiar. Through exploration of the conventions and limitations of maps, we recognized that by utilizing and blending existing genres, we could connect Illinois State University students to places in Bloomington-Normal.

If you are interested in viewing our completed website, you can find it at: https://sites.google.com/site/camsdpustocommunity/.

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The authors are freshmen Presidential Scholars at Illinois State University and members of the English 145.12 class under the instruction of Kate Browne. These students include **Nora Fredstrom, Fawna Goldi-Wasson, Hannah Kehe, Mike Lisack, Jennifer Morley, Cassie Myroth, Beau Ott, Laura Rocco, Katie Tollakson,** and **Wes Ward**. As a group, they share interests in writing, listening to music, and twerking. This class brought together ten students with different personalities, but they were able to collaborate and use their different talents to tackle this project.

# Publishing with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*

*GWRJ* Editors

## Our Mission Statement

The *GWRJ* is dedicated to publishing articles by writers and scholars whose work investigates the practices of people writing (and acting) in different writing situations and in a variety of different genres. We encourage both individuals and groups to submit work that studies and explores the different ways that writers learn how to write in different genres and settings—not just within the boundaries of academia, but in all kinds of settings where writing happens. Because we identify as "writing research" any type of composition that endeavors to uncover new information about how people work with writing or how writing works, a wide range of techniques and styles of writing might be applicable. For example, a first person narrative, an informal conversation about writing, a formal study of writing, or even an artistic production could all be useful techniques for developing a *GWRJ* article. However, accepted articles will be informed by either primary research into writing behaviors and activities and/or by scholarship in the field of writing studies that addresses theories of how people learn to compose in different situations.

## General Information

### *Submissions*

Articles can be submitted to the *GWRJ* at any time. However, we do have deadlines for upcoming issues. For issue 6.1, which will come out as we begin the Fall 2015 semester, articles must be submitted by October 1, 2014. We would, however, like to encourage students who have conducted writing research in their Spring 2014 courses to submit their work at the end of the semester, allowing us to give these articles special attention during the summer. The deadline for consideration in our 6.2 (Spring 2016) issue is December 19th, 2014. Please contact the Associate Editor at grassrootswriting@gmail.com with queries about possible submissions and to submit your work.

### *Queries and Drafts*

The *GWRJ* has a strong commitment to working with interested authors to help them prepare for publication. So if you think you have a good idea but are not sure how to proceed, please contact us. One of our editorial staff will be happy to work with you one-on-one to develop your idea and/or article.

### *Honoraria*

The *GWRJ* offers an honorarium of $50.00 for each article published in a print issue of the *GWRJ*.

## Style and Tone

Because we encourage so many different kinds of textual production and research in the *GWRJ*, issues of appropriate style and tone can be complicated. However, we can offer the following basic style criteria for authors to consider:

1. The readership of the *GWRJ* is writers. It is not "students," even though the journal is used by writing instructors and students. (The *GWRJ* remains the primary text for Writing Program courses at Illinois State University, and it's also used by teachers and students in other programs as well.) *GWRJ* articles should attempt to provide valuable content to writers who are engaged in the activity of "learning how to learn about" genres.

2. "Teacher narratives" are not acceptable as *GWRJ* articles. We are interested in material that looks at literate activities from the position of a "writer" or a "researcher," but articles that discuss ways to "teach" people about writing are not appropriate for this journal.

3. Language and style that is overly formal or "academic" may be unappealing to our readers.

4. A tone that situates the author as a "master" writer is often problematic. (We call these "success narratives", which are often how-to type articles in which the focus is on the author's learned expertise.) Authors should remember that no one "learns" a genre completely or in completely simple way. So while writers (especially of first-person narratives) may write about successes, they need to complicate the genres with which they are working.

5. Tone or content that situates the reader as a certain kind of writer (whether as a master or novice) with certain kinds of shared experiences can be problematic because the readership of the journal constitutes a wide variety of writers with different writing abilities and experiences.

6. Whenever possible, articles should make use of published research about writing practices, but the research should be incorporated into the text in a relevant and accessible way so that readers who are not used to reading scholarly research can still benefit from the references.

7. Articles should be as specific as possible about the genre or set of writing activities they are studying. Generalized studies or discussions of "writing" are not encouraged. Additionally, examples of "writing-in-progress" are always encouraged and are often necessary for articles to be useful to our readers.

## Media, Mode, and Copyright Issues

The *GWRJ* can publish both visual and digital texts. We encourage multimodal texts, including still images, audio, video, and hypertexts. However, authors working with these technologies need to be careful about copyright issues as we cannot publish any kinds of materials that may result in copyright infringement. We can sometimes seek copyright permissions, but in the case of materials such as works of art or graphics/images owned by large companies, this is often not possible. This is true for print-based articles that use images as well. We can, however, include materials that are covered by Fair Use; see http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html for Fair Use guidelines. Also, video/audio of research subjects can require special kinds of permission processes, so you should contact the *GWRJ* editors before beginning this kind of work. Research using subjects who are considered "protected" populations (people under eighteen and people with mental disabilities, among others) are not acceptable for *GWRJ* articles unless the author has received approval from Illinois State University or another institution to conduct research with human subjects.

## Researching for *Grassroots*

*What does it mean to "do writing research?"* For the *GWRJ*, it means people observing, investigating, critiquing, and even participating in the activities that humans engage in that involve literate practice.

*But what does it really mean?* In more practical language, it means finding some situation where humans are doing things that involve language (which can mean composing in oral, aural, visual, etc. genres, not just writing on paper) and thinking, "Hey, that looks interesting," and then taking the time to investigate that practice in some detail.

But this kind of research isn't just about people. It's really about what we call "activity systems," which just means that we want to learn about all kinds of complicated interactions, not just what a particular kind of text looks like or what a particular person does when they produce a text (although we're interested in those things, too). We also want to know about the interactions between people as they produce texts and the interactions between humans and their tools, practices, and different kinds of textual productions. And we're interested in how certain kinds of texts work to shape our interactions, for example, the ways the genre of resumes might shape how people interact when they engage in the activities of finding and offering work.

To help researchers who might be thinking about or engaging in literate practices that they'd like to investigate, we've created this list of the types of research projects that might be interesting or appropriate for the *GWRJ*.

### *Investigating Genres*

These kinds of research projects usually investigate the nuances of particular genres: how they are made and who makes them, the distinctive features they have, who uses them, how and where they are used, and how they do particular kinds of communicative work in the world. This research is often straightforward, and, as some of the articles in our early issues reveal, this kind of genre investigation might have a "how-to" feel, because many of the authors creating these pieces are also trying to learn how to produce that genre. However, genre investigations can move far beyond these "how-to" pieces. There are countless ways that genres can be examined in relation to how they do work in the world, including investigating technological and social implications that our readers would be interested in. "Following" genres to see where they go and the kinds of work they are made to do can take an author well beyond simply describing the features of a particular kind of text. One issue that is of concern to the *GWRJ* editors is that genre investigations can problematically "fix" genres, that is, situate them as stable productions that are always the same. So we encourage researchers to consider the ways that genres constantly move and shift over time and in different situations.

### *Personal Explorations of Literate Practice*

This kind of research is often closely connected to genre investigations. Authors examine their own practices to discover how they have learned to produce certain kinds of writing in certain situations, or they investigate particular kinds of composing practices, such as different practices for engaging in research or revision. Like genre investigations, these kinds of projects sometimes have a "how-to" focus, as authors learn to think about and explain to others the things they know (or are coming to know) about different literate practices.

### *Composing Practices*

This kind of research looks at particular kinds of composing practices, including invention (coming up with ideas), research, revision, etc. It often overlaps with personal exploration research because authors are often investigating their own practices. However, this research could certainly involve interviews or observations of how other individuals or groups engage in these practices. One issue that concerns the *GWRJ* editors is that this kind of research can lead to assumptions that these composing practices are "universal"— that is, that they work in similar ways across all kinds of genres and writing situations. While it is possible to trace similar kinds of literate practices across different situations (and, in fact, it can be really interesting—see, for example, Kevin Roozen's writing research, "Tracing Trajectories of Practice: Repurposing in One Student's Developing Disciplinary Writing Processes," in *Written Communication*, 2010 27:3), it is important to remember that we really can't talk about an activity like "revising," for example, as if it's something that a person does the same way in every kind of situation.

### *Literate Activity in the Wild*

While writing in classrooms or for school settings can often seem very cut-and-dried, these practices are really more complicated than they seem. Part of the reason we don't see the complications of many kinds of literate practices is that once we become "embedded" in the activity, it no longer seems complicated to us! We know how to do it, but we don't really remember how we learned to do it. Another reason that we sometimes miss the complications of writing is that there are "tropes" or particular ways of defining/understanding these practices that make them look simple and straightforward. An example of this is the activity of "writing a paper," which can bring up very stylized and simplistic images of how a person just sits down, does some research, and then writes a paper for a particular class. But in fact, not only are the acts of researching and composing much more complicated than this limited view might offer, but also, this kind of literate practice is actually much more interactive than we might generally think. The *GWRJ* is interested in investigations that look at specific situations/locations where all kinds of literate acts are happening. We want to see researchers "unpacking" what is actually happening when people try to compose particular kinds of texts in particular situations. We are also interested in research that looks at the ways that textual production is interactive—how it involves all kinds of interactions between different people and different objects, tools, and other entities over time. This kind of research can involve the interactions of people and genres and different cultural norms and practices.

### *Case Studies of Individual Literate Practices*

This type of research focuses very closely on particular individuals and the kinds of literate practices they engage in in their daily lives. Some of our previously published articles that take this research approach include research into the ways an individual learns to interact with a particular genre or particular literate situation. But we are also very interested in research that looks at literate practice more broadly and deeply. So, for example, how does an individual take composing practices from one situation and apply them to another? How does an individual learn to interact within a particular setting in which different types of genres are being produced (so, say, a new kind of work environment)? This kind of research can be constructed as a collaborative process in which one researcher acts as an observer while the other engages in an exploration of his/her personal practices.

### *Linguistics Writing Research*

The work that currently exists in the journal in this area tends to focus specifically on grammar conventions or on the usage of particular kinds of stylistic or punctuation devices. However, we want to encourage linguistic writing research that is more robust and complicated, including projects that explore corpus linguistics (using a collection of data to look at particular kinds of textual practice) or sociolinguistics (investigating the particular ways that humans use language within social systems).

### *Global or Intercultural Literate Practices*

It is only within a few issues of the journal that the *GWRJ* has been able to publish research on literate practices as they move across cultural and/or geographical spaces. For examples, see Adriana Gradea's article in issue 4.1 ("The Little Genre that Could: CHAT Mapping the Slogan of the Big Communist Propaganda") and Summer Qabazard's article in issue 3.2 ("From Religion to Chicken Cannibalism: American Fast Food Ads in Kuwait"). We would like to encourage more of this kind of research in future issues as we are highly interested in research that studies the ways that people and textual practices move across these kinds of boundaries.

## The Researcher's Process

According to one of our *GWRJ* authors, Lisa Phillips, it can be useful for authors to investigate and articulate a personal process that will be meaningful for them when developing ideas for research projects. She offered us her notes on the process that she followed to create her article for the journal, "Writing with Tattoo Ink: Composing that Gets under the Skin." Her process is presented below in ten "steps" that *GWRJ* authors might find useful.

### *Step One*

Come up with a general "topic" description. So the first question to answer is: "What is it about writing in the world that interests me?"

### *Step Two*

As the process continues, think more specifically about the genre, setting, and/or specific practices under investigation. (Using the types of research we've listed above can be useful for focusing a topic.) So the second question an author might want to answer is: "How will I go about finding what I want to know?"

### *Step Three*

Next, think about both the research practices that will be needed to gather data as well as the style of article that will be most appropriate. One excellent way to do this is to read existing articles and examine the different ways that authors have approached different topics and different kinds of research.

### *Step Four*

Because *Grassroots* articles are a fairly unique kind of writing, authors may find it useful to consider past writing experiences that they might be able to draw on as they write. We call these "antecedent genres," and they can be important to think about because these prior experiences always shape how an author writes, especially when he or she is writing in a new and unfamiliar genre. While these antecedent genres will certainly be useful, they can also cause problems because aspects of an author's past writing may not exactly fit with the style, tone, or content that is appropriate for *GWRJ* articles. Some questions to ask here are: "What kinds of writing do I already know how to do that I can use to help me? How are they similar and how are they different?"

### *Step Five*

It can also be important to think about "target genres," or types of writing that might be used as examples during the research and writing process. Obviously previously published *GWRJ* articles can be useful in this way, but it can also be interesting to think of other kinds of writing that might serve as examples. Writing research in the field of rhetoric and composition can be useful (for example, books and articles found on the

WAC Clearinghouse Website at http://wac.colostate.edu), but other kinds of research into social practices or even different kinds of journalism can be used as interesting models.

### *Step Six*

Consider what kinds of visuals a text might need. Visual examples of different kinds of writing can be crucial to add interest and information to a text, but copyright issues will need to be considered. Charts, graphs, or other illustrations that highlight important aspects of the data you've collected can also be important.

### *Step Seven*

Thinking carefully about what information (data) is needed to make the article credible and useful for readers is a critical step. Thus, once an author has made decisions about the type of research he or she wants to do, it will also be important for him or her to make a plan for how to get that research. Will it be necessary to visit sites where writing is happening? Interview people about how they produce or use different kinds of writing? Find historical examples of types of writing?

### *Step Eight*

If the article is going to include observations of people's writing activities or interviews or surveys, you'll need to obtain the proper permission. The interview/image consent form for *GWRJ* articles can be found on our website: http://isuwriting.com/grassroots/.

### *Step Nine*

Although the *GWRJ* doesn't require any particular style of citation, we do require that authors cite all of their information. The editors will help authors think about what needs to be cited and how it can be done, but authors will want to think about the best way to cite. This includes considering the different ways that citation works in different kinds of writing; for example, scholarly journal articles cite very differently than newspaper or magazine articles or blog posts. Sometimes the style of citation can really affect how a reader thinks about the information in an article, so it's important to think not only about what to cite, but also how to cite it.

### *Step Ten*

As the text is being produced, it is critical to keep in mind the needs and interests of *GWRJ* readers. They are interested in reading about a wide range of topics, and they enjoy articles written in a wide range of styles. But since our readers have such a wide range of interests, it is important not to take them for granted. Writing that is interesting, lively, and accessible is important, but perhaps the most important thing to remember is that your research, no matter how it's presented, represents your knowledge and thinking about a topic related to writing that is important to you. And since we're all writers, and all of us are learning all the time about how to "do writing" in the world, sharing your knowledge is, ultimately, an act of community.

## Questions?

If you have any questions about the journal or any of the articles, you can send queries to grassrootswriting@gmail.com. Part of our mission is to welcome and encourage all kinds of writing research, so if you have an idea that you want to develop, please don't hesitate to share it with us.