

Digging into a Scholarly Journal: The Secrets Behind Genre Analysis

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Witherspoon's article chronicles her process of writing a genre research report and describes her approach to performing a genre analysis of a scholarly academic journal. She suggests that the method she used can be applied to studying any genre of writing, and she discusses a method to determine the audience of a genre, known as an audience-reception study. Witherspoon's article shares her experiences as a writing researcher, the ups and downs of writing a genre research report, and her journey to conduct a study of genre and audience.

My Story

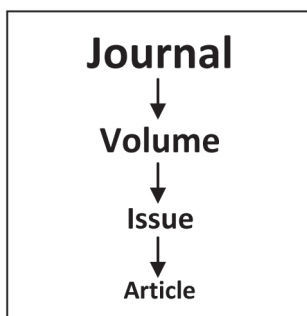
It was the first day of my English class as a sophomore in college, and I was already told we would be starting a research paper. "Great," I thought. "Just my luck." Let's just say English has never been my strong suit, so I was not looking forward to this. I am more of a science and math person, so having to write papers, let alone a research paper, is not my cup of tea. I thought to myself, "I have written plenty of research papers in high school. This will be easy."

However, I was incredibly wrong. As the professor began to explain the assignment to the class, I was lost. The goal of the project was to conduct primary research by performing a genre analysis of a scholarly academic journal. What is a scholarly academic journal? Little did I know, I was going to get to know scholarly academic journals very well.

As I sat in class taking notes, I heard terms I had never heard of before, such as specialized discourse, qualitative research, and genre analysis. My professor was jumping up and down about this project, but I sat in my

chair, pouting like a child. Pulling my hair out, I thought, “Where do I even begin with this project?” My first thought was that I must choose a topic I would enjoy. But how could performing research on a journal be something that I would find interesting? I decided to choose an occupational therapy journal, since that was the field that I was currently majoring in. Friends, I must tell you, if you ever end up conducting genre analysis on a journal, choose a journal that you will enjoy researching and writing about. You will be spending a lot of time with this scholarly journal; it will become your best friend. For weeks straight, I had a date every night with the journal in my dorm room. Weekends were not spent with friends at the movies, but instead with my journal, collecting data. OK, I must admit that I am exaggerating just a little. I did not actually spend all my waking time with the journal, but I can’t emphasize enough that before beginning your writing research report, you must first really understand the journal (or other genre) that you are working with. You can do this by spending a lot of time with it, getting to know it, and learning about it.

I say “or other genre” because while I studied the genre of a scholarly academic journal for my writing research report, you can study any genre that you please. You may be asking yourself, “Can I use the process that she used for other genres, too?” The answer is, “Yes!” The process that I used can also be used to study various other genres, not only scholarly academic journals. The main goal or purpose why I performed a genre analysis on a scholarly academic journal and not on a different, more “fun” genre was to gain an awareness of how and why professionals in my field of occupational therapy use writing in journal articles as a way of conversation and communication.



makes up
a
journal.

My first task was to go to the library, walk through the journal section, and choose a journal. So, off to the library I went. In the journal section, there are hundreds of leather-bound journals. I had never been in this part of the library before, and I am not sure I will ever return to that dreaded nightmare of a place again. To be honest, I did not even know it existed. I felt like a lost puppy looking for home, only I was looking through journals, trying to find an occupational therapy journal. The fact that the journals are in alphabetical

order by field made the fight much easier.

Wandering through the books, I finally found the one I wanted: *Physical*

and *Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*. Yes! I had won the battle, and the journals had lost. Before collecting data, I had to learn what makes up a journal (see Figure 1), including volumes, issues, and then individual articles. I then filled my arms with multiple volumes of the journal. As I roamed around the library, I found an empty spot, sat down with the journals, and started digging into my

work. Eyes stared at me, thinking, “This blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl must be a nerd.” After what seemed like hours of getting acquainted with the texts, I came back to my dorm, only to see papers of collected data scattered all over the place. It looked as though a tornado had just gone through.

Now that I have introduced you to how I met my new best friend or so-called roommate, the scholarly academic journal, let us continue on the journey of my research experience as a first-time writing researcher. First, I wanted to understand how and why scholars write in the journal. I was the researcher; I was the one behind all of the hard-collected data and analysis. By sharing my experience with you, I hope you will know one way of going about genre analysis and a possible set of steps to take if you are ever asked to perform genre analysis on a scholarly academic journal or any other genre for that matter. As I mentioned before, these same steps can be applied to researching any genre in order to better understand it or figure out how to compose more successfully in it.

Why Should We Perform Genre Analysis?

You may be wondering why anyone would want to conduct genre analysis on a scholarly journal in the first place. Trust me; I had my own doubts about what I was being asked to do as well. I wanted to find a reason for what I was doing, and lo and behold, after some digging and researching, I found an answer. According to writing researchers Downs and Wardle (2007), by performing a genre analysis, writers gain increased self-awareness about writing and awareness of research writing as a conversation, allowing them to practice the moves of other researchers. By examining scholarly articles, writers can get a sense of the specialized discourse within a professional community, also known as field or discipline. In this case, the field that I hoped to one day be a part of was occupational therapy. Therefore, I wanted to learn and understand how occupational therapy professionals communicate with one another as well as the expectations and values associated with performing research and composing writing in occupational therapy. Performing a genre analysis introduces a person to writing within a specific discourse community and the language used by the scholars in that discipline (Downs & Wardle, 2007). Genre analysis of a scholarly journal helps you to consider the parts of writing that work together in unison and to understand that research is part of an ongoing conversation. While I am sharing with you the steps that I took, there are many other approaches to conducting a genre analysis of a scholarly journal, or any genre for that matter. This is just one technique that worked for me. But, there may be another procedure that works better for you, so choose the method that you prefer.

Step 1: Choose the Genre for Your Genre Analysis/Research

I first began the research process by choosing the journal *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*. The aim of this journal is to reveal important information regarding clinical research and practical applications of therapy practice to physical and occupational therapists involved in the rehabilitation of pediatric patients. If you are unsure of what an aim is, it is essentially the intended purpose and desired outcome of the journal. In short, the aim is the reason for or the goal of the journal. Most journals will have a specific section or heading dedicated to the aim and scope, revealing it to the readers. Usually the aim will be near the submission guidelines for authors, which is where I found the aim for my journal. However, this may not always be the case, and then you might have to infer the aim of the journal.

The next thing I learned was that *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics* is a quarterly journal that is peer-reviewed, also known as refereed. When I first heard the word “refereed,” I thought, “You mean the official at a sports game?” I was wrong. To clarify, if an article is refereed, that means that the article went through a revision process before being published. A referred article will contain content vetted by experts and reviewed by an editor.

Once I located the aim and scope, I was able to determine the goal or purpose of the journal. It is highly important to understand the goal of any genre because it affects the audience for the journal and the language and tone used, as well as the topics that are discussed in the journal. So, the goal is what impacts the working parts of the journal. The goal of *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics* is to bring information to all therapists involved in the developmental and physical rehabilitation of infants and children, discussing current clinical research and practical applications. The clinical studies introduced in the articles provide evidence and aid in guiding therapists in their intervention processes. Therapists rely on the information given to help them in their practice; they learn from and teach one another. The case studies give frames of reference for therapists to use, acting as a foundation on which to base therapy. Basically, the journal articles allow therapists to communicate with one another about their research and evidence. Additionally, many other fields besides occupational therapy have journals that are similar. Most likely, those journals will all have a different goals and purposes with different content and topics. However, all academic journals are similar in that they relay or report information from one person to another.

On Your Way to Becoming a Writing Researcher

In order to further learn about the goals, audience, and context of the journal I was studying, I decided to conduct primary research, or a qualitative

study. This is called writing research, and it is an ongoing process with many steps involved in order to collect and gather data about the genre being studied. As I became a writing researcher, I was able to experience how scholars carry out research, and this allowed me to create my own knowledge and make conclusions based on my findings. The research process included examining the features of the journal, such as the Table of Contents and common headings and sections, as well as the topics discussed and language used. In addition, I conducted an audience reception study to determine the journal's intended audience, which I will further explain later. I also examined particular paragraphs to observe the audience-specific language. In this study, I observed various working parts of the journal articles in the years 1981, 1999, and 2012 to determine trends and differences in the organization and infer the progression of the journal.

Step 2: Decide on Your Procedure

Since research is an ongoing process, researchers must first determine what they want their research approach to be, following it step by step. By having a procedure, it gives the researcher a guide to follow, almost like following a recipe or instructions. Each writer has their own writing process. Likewise, each researcher has their own individualized research process. However, by learning about my research process, it might give you some ideas about how to conduct your own research. For someone who has never performed writing research before, this might be extremely difficult. But I am here to tell you that it really is not as difficult as it may appear. In the end, I was able to conduct my writing research, and I actually felt like an expert or scholar.

Experts who collect data will often record that data in some kind of field research journal. In my case, my field research journal was a pink spiral notebook that included all notes, thoughts, and ideas about the research process, similar to a diary. Having a research journal was probably the best idea ever. My recommendation is to have a journal allowing you to write and record all of your data along the way. Then, when it comes to writing the research report, it will be easy as pie to summarize your analysis of the genre.

The Long-Fought Journey

After I decided on my plan of action for research and chose the journal, I started collecting data. So, where did I start? The first set of data I wanted to collect included the elements and features of the journal, such as the sections and headings of articles from Volume 1 (1981), Volume 19 (1999),

and Volume 32 (2012). I recorded similarities and differences between the years in my field journal. I found it easiest to record everything in a notebook and then color coordinate with various colored pens. I quickly scanned and read through the Table of Contents for these three years, creating categories of common word choices, topics, and authors.

Once I collected the data for this study, I then conducted an audience reception study. What is an audience reception study, you might ask? An audience reception study aids in determining who the intended and unintended audience is for the journal (or other genre), if it is not clear. So, researchers would especially want to conduct an audience reception study if they are interested in finding out whether their inferences about the audience of a genre are right. For example, just as Nicholas Sparks' romance novels are mostly intended for a female audience, journals and other genres also have a particular audience that writers keep in mind. But are Nicholas Sparks' novels really read by mostly women? An audience reception study can answer this question, and I wanted to find out something similar about the journal I was studying—who really are the readers of this genre?

Who Will Be Your Participants?

Volumes

The volumes chosen from the journal can be considered subjects used in the study, acting as the center of discussion. Volumes act as subjects because they are the focus of the study, just as people or mice are studied in other kinds of research. I selected three volumes from across the years of the journal for my audience reception study because I wanted to observe the development and progression of the journal. By comparing and contrasting, I could determine how the journal has changed since 1981. While I chose this method, every researcher has their own preference. Other researchers might chose volumes from three consecutive years.

Here is where the limitations of the study arise. I did not perform a genre analysis on every volume, issue, and article published throughout the years, but instead focused on a select few. Looking at all the volumes would have taken far too long to complete in the short amount of time I had. The results might have differed if I had conducted a quantitative study with more samples instead of a qualitative study. But I was looking at quality versus quantity. As you are writing your writing research report, it is important to discuss the limitations of your study and any sources of bias with your readers. Often times this is a step that researchers will skip, but it is a step that should not be forgotten.

Participants

I chose the participants, meaning people, for my audience reception study for a specific reason and purpose, not at random. If you conduct an audience reception study, you may choose your participants at random, but the purpose of my audience reception study was to support my hypothesis that the journal's intended audience is occupational and physical therapy professionals. Thus, I chose six participants: three students in my English 212 class and three professors. I chose professors and college students in order to show comparisons and similarities. One professor teaches an occupational therapy class at Saginaw Valley State University and has been an occupational therapist for years, working in both pediatrics and geriatrics. Another professor is an associate professor of finance at Northwood University. The third professor instructs English writing courses at Saginaw Valley State University. By choosing professors in diverse fields with varying degrees, I was able to bring each professor's specific knowledge and viewpoint to my study.

I selectively chose the other three participants from my English 212 class so that their majors would differ. One is majoring in economics, the other in computer information systems, and the last in athletic training and pre-medicine. The participants were all asked to read the same abstract paragraph, and I then asked them to circle the words that they did not know. I also asked a few questions regarding what they understood from the paragraph. I decided to conduct my study in this way because it was a method that my professor had used as an example during class. I also chose this route for my study because it would only take the participants 5-10 minutes to complete, making it an easy way to collect data that wouldn't inhibit my participants too much. Another type of study you might consider is to have the participants highlight with a marker words that stood out to them. Additionally, if you are studying some genre other than a journal, the style of your study and the way you carry it out will differ. All in all, it is your decision how to conduct your audience reception study, but it usually involves asking participants to somehow indicate their knowledge or familiarity with an example of the genre.

Step 3: Collect Data and Results

Once you have gathered all of your findings, it is time to compose your writing research report about the information you collected. Crafting the actual writing research report is the easy step. After your data is collected, you are running to home base. It will be especially easy if you recorded everything in a journal like I did.

I discussed the results of my genre analysis in the order it was performed instead of skipping around. First, I described the features and elements of the articles within various volumes, which was the first set of data that I collected. I focused heavily on the Table of Contents, word choice, and common topics to examine trends and patterns. I was also interested in common themes that the scholars wrote about, so I read through many opening paragraphs of various articles. These components were especially important to me as they are all related to the intended audience. Lastly, because the scholars are experts in the field, I was attracted to observing authors who made note of other “popular” authors who had written multiple articles in the field. Basically, I took bits and pieces of the journal that worked together and broke them down, carefully making meaning of the data I collected.

One aspect of my research that really gained my interest was the audience of the journal, which led me to perform the audience reception study, an approach recommended to me by my professor. As you compose your writing research report, it is a good idea to select a focus. This way you can choose one aspect to solely devote your attention to as the main focus of your research. There are numerous techniques and ways of deciding on a focus, and really, it all depends on why you are researching a particular genre. This will determine how you should focus your writing research.

Who Is The Audience For Your Journal?

From my observations of the articles, it seemed to me that professionals in occupational and physical therapy are the intended audience of the journal. The word choice in the articles and the topics discussed in the journal worked in unison to fit the audience. However, I needed to conduct additional primary research in order to support this hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, I conducted an audience reception study to use as support, or in other words, to find out if I was correct. I asked participants to read an abstract paragraph from the journal and circle the words they did not know, followed by a few follow-up questions. I asked these follow-up questions in order to determine if they actually understood what was being said in the paragraph or if it was all mumbo jumbo to them.

Through the data gathered, I observed that the journal does have an intended audience. Except for the occupational therapist, most of the participants circled the same words, meaning that the occupational therapist had background knowledge of these words, which included “nystagmus” and “postrotary vestibular.” Those outside of the field who

read the journal make up the unintended audience and are not necessarily “meant” to read the journal. In addition, participants who were not scholars or had no background knowledge of therapy or the medical field understood very little from the paragraph, while the occupational therapist was able to give a precise summary. All in all, I concluded through the audience reception study that the journal’s intended audience is occupational and physical therapy professionals, hence the use of the field-specific language.

Start Digging into YOUR Genre

Research! Research is everywhere around us. We cannot hide from it. This will not be my last time conducting research. In my profession, as in many other professions, research is common. Therefore, the chances of me continuing to generate my own knowledge by conducting primary research are pretty high, unlike winning the lottery. But even if your profession doesn’t require this kind of primary research, you, too, might want to perform a qualitative study or a genre analysis in order to further learn about a particular type of writing or a particular field. By practicing the moves of an expert researcher, you can gain awareness of how research is a process and how research acts as an ongoing conversation between scholars. But you can also learn what defines a particular kind of writing, so you might be able to compose something in that genre yourself.

My genre analysis expanded my knowledge about how my future profession interacts and engages within their specialized discourse community. Because of my research, I now know the values and expectations that the discipline of occupational therapy holds regarding writing and research. By practicing the moves, I gained the skills to be able to successfully write and perform research in my future endeavors. But the process that I used can be applied to any variety of writing. Just because you might not be asked to do what I did, you can still use my study as an example, conducting an analysis on another genre in the same way.

Now that I have discussed in detail my process and experience of conducting a genre analysis on a scholarly journal, it is time for you to start digging into the genre of writing you have chosen to study. Consider me as a fellow researcher and follow my footsteps as you begin your research. Or, you might take your own path, seeking out and discovering other strategies for writing research. Go ahead. You are the researcher now.

References

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Sarah Witherspoon is a junior at Saginaw Valley State University in Saginaw, Michigan. Surprisingly, she is not an English major but is currently studying Occupational Therapy, which goes to show that not just English lovers can write. She hopes to become an OT specializing in pediatrics or neuroscience. She has a dream of working in Arizona to escape the long Michigan winters. Sarah appreciates all the love and support from her family, and she would not be where she is without them.