

House Hunting as an Activity System

A B M Shafiqul Islam

Finding housing is challenging for any new international student. It is not just because the students are in a different culture but also because the process of renting itself entails a plethora of interconnected components of a complex activity system. In this article, Shafiq attempts to explore how this activity system works, seeing the complexity behind the apparently easy-to-do task of finding housing.

New School, Old Problems

In March of 2021, when I was officially offered a place in the PhD program in the Department of English at Illinois State University (ISU), I became super elated thinking that my teaching career was about to get a commercial break and I was going back to my age-old identity of being a student once again. But this temporary excitement started disappearing when I began to think about the bulk of preparations needed to make the transition smooth and easy.

Because I'm from Bangladesh, I needed to engage in all kinds of writing and research activities, like filling out the paperwork to apply for US visas for myself and my family, choosing the courses for the Fall semester, making regular contacts with ISU, buying air tickets, and knowing and coming to terms with the ever-changing COVID-19 protocols (such as travel requirements, etc.), one concern really made me panicky and put me on edge. Since I was travelling with my family, finding housing around the ISU campus was of paramount importance to me, and almost all the new students face some kind of challenges regarding managing accommodation. For international

students, these challenges become more acute because they are in a foreign land where the culture, systems, and people are equally foreign to them.

Though I had a concern about housing, I thought it would not be a big deal for me. When asked by my Dad, “Where will you stay once you reach the US?” my prompt reply was, “In an apartment,” of course. The source of such confidence mainly originated from my previous experiences of leasing apartments in Saudi Arabia, where I lived for more than a decade and worked there as an English language teacher at a state-run university. For that self-belief and self-confidence, I took that matter lightly and because of that, the price I paid was costly. I had to stay in a hotel in Normal for forty-five days.

While at the beginning, I showed laxity in looking for apartments, I was trying to be more serious with the time of departure for the US approaching. I preferred to find housing close to the ISU campus because I thought it would help me commute between the university and my apartment easily. The more concerned I became about housing, the more agile, proactive, and communicative I was trying to be. When I started to dive deep into the whole process of renting an apartment in a foreign land, I became more informed about the complexities of this process. Until then, I was not quite aware of the fact that there existed multiple layers of procedures in finalizing housing. I also got connected with some of my fellow countrymen from Bangladesh studying here at ISU who informed me about the acute crisis of accommodation in Bloomington-Normal area. In the meantime, my date of departure arrived, and I had to fly for the US without finalizing housing. I reached Normal on 26th of July 2021, and rented a room in a hotel as a temporary stay. With that, my in-person search for housing began here in the US. Let’s go into the details of the whole story.

House Hunting as a Genre or an Activity System

In most cases, any genre we might consider will intersect with one or more activity systems. According to Carolyn Miller (1984), who was one of the first scholars to help define the field of Rhetorical Genre Studies, “genre can be said to represent typified rhetorical action” (p. 151). That might sound complicated, but it just means that **genres** can be understood as texts that are produced over and over again, and over time, humans become used to thinking of this kind of text in a certain way. So, when we see a document with a person’s name at the top and a page filled with very short, concise details about that person’s work experience, we say, “Oh, a resume.” Resumes, as a genre, are used in a range of different kinds of activity systems, like

applying for jobs, or applying for scholarships. They aren't the only genres in the system, though, and they interact with a range of other genres (cover letters, phone calls, interviews, conversations, background checks, etc.) and these genres also interact with a whole range of different people and tools. So, we can't really understand genres very well unless we understand the systems where they are operating. As Julie Hengst (2020) says,

sociocultural activities are best identified in terms of the goals or objectives people are working to accomplish. For example, eating dinner at home after work and eating dinner on stage during a play may involve many similar features, (e.g., table, chairs, plates, silverware, food, patterns of dinner table talk). However, when we consider the different goals and objectives participants bring to these two settings, we recognize that these are two quite different sociocultural activities.

When looking at the activity system of “house hunting,” it's also important to remember that genres are more than just texts—they are *tools* that the participants use to achieve a particular goal. Understanding an activity system also allows us to see the complex ways that they interact with people and communities. Throughout my housing search in Bloomington-Normal, I eventually realized that finding housing is not a straightforward activity; rather it involved a complex process consisting of activities at different levels, and a whole range of different kinds of texts.

Activity Systems

The term activity system refers to the idea that human activity is often goal-directed and always (in at least some ways) social. When studying different kinds of writing and texts (genres) it's often really useful to also study the kind of human activity they are part of.

As already mentioned, I had experiences of renting apartments in Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh (my home country). The ISU Writing Program might describe these prior experiences as my **antecedent knowledge**. Antecedent knowledge refers to the knowledge that people bring with them from their past to new situations and venues. In ISU writing, antecedent knowledge *is* a term used to describe all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing (ISU Writing Program website). But my antecedent knowledge of renting an apartment in Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh did not help me in the US. Instead, it led to serious misconceptions, misguided generalizations, and untold sufferings, including living in a hotel for around forty-five days with my family.

Since this was my first ever visit to the US, I did not have any hands-on experience on how to deal with the housing crisis. All I learned about renting was from the websites of the leading leasing agencies located in Normal and Bloomington. Some of the fellow Bangladeshi students studying at ISU also

provided me with some basic information. What I realized was that in the US, managing housing was not as simple as I thought. Previously, I assumed that things like Social Security Number (SSN), credit history, bank accounts etc., were not required for renting, though later, they all were considered essential. The very fatal misconception that I had developed was that renting an apartment would be possible, even if I was not physically present in the US. Later I came to know that I could rent an apartment in my absence only if someone else would guarantee the full-year payment on my behalf. After reaching the US, I started looking for apartments in person, and that helped me unlearn all those misconceptions about renting.

Through all of these experiences, I've realized that the process of finding housing is a deliberate, complex activity. The first activity I engaged in was asking myself questions to try to understand what I was looking for (and what I might be willing to settle for)—and I had many, many questions! The first concern was about the location (whether in Normal or Bloomington) of my apartment. If I go for choosing Normal, what should be the maximum distance between ISU and my apartment that I can effortlessly cover on foot? Do I prefer off-campus or on-campus housing? Should I rent an apartment from the leasing agencies or from the private owners? Should I choose a two-bedroom or three-bedroom apartment? Can I afford an apartment that does not include utility charges? How are my neighbors? So, all these aspects/issues needed to be considered while renting an apartment.

Housing in Bloomington-Normal

While searching for housing in the Bloomington-Normal area, I got acquainted with different types of housing arrangements. Needless to mention that they are different in size, shape, and rent cost and serve various purposes. Single-family detached homes are the single most common housing type here. Other types of housing that are prevalent in Bloomington-Normal area include large apartment complexes or high-rise apartments, duplexes, homes converted to apartments or other small apartment buildings and a few mobile homes or trailers. Students mostly prefer university-run dorms and other close-to-campus apartments. Students who are accompanied by their families usually live outside the campus in family apartments or houses.

Housing Back Home

In Bangladesh, we do not have as much diversity in housing as in the U.S., so figuring out all the different choices was also a kind of house hunting literacy I needed to acquire. In Bangladesh, students mostly live in the university

halls (also called dorms), and in bachelor quarters (also called students' mess). Besides that, people in the cities mostly reside in multi-story apartment buildings. Very few people live in their own houses. My past experiences that I accumulated from my stay in Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh involved similar kinds of activities and were primarily based on in-person visits to the apartment buildings. In Bangladesh, there were hardly any reliable online agencies which could be contacted for leasing. Recently, some online platforms emerged, though their reputation and public reviews are quite unsatisfactory. People looking for apartments need to walk around the streets of the neighborhood of their preference and look for the signpost "To let" hanging outside the buildings. Buildings having that signpost indicate that there are vacant apartments. Sometimes, we notice some printed stuff with "To-Let" written on it and glued on the street walls. Often, information about vacant apartments is passed on through our acquaintances. Nowadays, people are using social media platforms for house rent. In every case, the potential tenants must contact the owner of the building to negotiate the rents and other required formalities. In some cases, they don't even need to go through a bunch of paperwork except submitting a handwritten completed form. Even in this age of digitalization, a lot of these activities are still done manually.



Figure 1: "To Let" sign at the main gate of a building in Bangladesh.

My experience was almost the same in Saudi Arabia. Anyone can rent an apartment even if they are not present on the spot. Though there exist some leasing agencies, most people don't use them. It does not require much paperwork to rent an apartment, although that has begun to change recently. So, considering my antecedent knowledge about renting apartments in two different countries, I remained confident until I reached Illinois, USA. When I found out that securing an apartment here is altogether a mammoth task and incorporates a plethora of other related attributes, I started realizing that my antecedent knowledge simply hindered the accomplishment of the goal: finding an accommodation.

House Hunting Activity in Bloomington-Normal: Finding the "Normal" in Normal

When I started sensing difficulties, I made contact with some current ISU students from Bangladesh. My sole purpose was to get ideas about finding ways of securing housing. I was desperately trying to explore all other possible sources. At one point, I also thought about approaching some of the

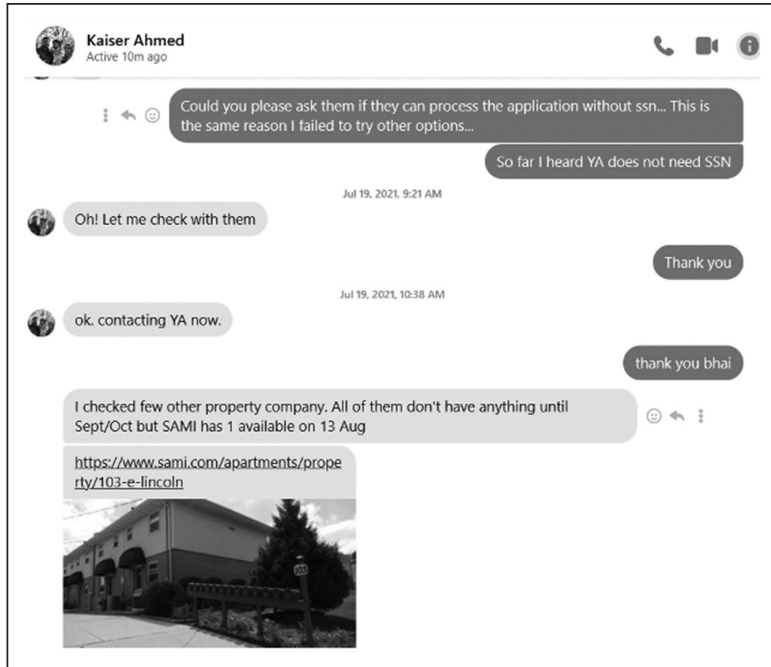


Figure 2: My conversation with Kaiser Ahmed.

fellow Americans who I already knew though later I discarded that idea. It was because I had to keep in mind that culturally, we were poles apart.

At first, the amount of information I received from different sources was wide-ranging and to some extent, quite misleading. As a result, I became very selective about people I would talk to. I decided to contact someone who I thought must have been ISU students. I further narrowed down my choices and contacted people who belonged to my home country, Bangladesh. This is where the sense of being in the **community** came to my mind. I realized that what I needed was not just information about housing in Bloomington-Normal area, but information from people who would understand some of the kind of confusion I was experiencing, and the kinds of new things I'd need to learn. Things that an American house hunter might know without even knowing how they know it. Again, as Julie Hengst (2020) says in her discussion of sociocultural interactions, “As skilled social actors, we tacitly recognize and navigate the many sociocultural activities of our everyday lives, but rarely need to name them in any systematic way or trace the complex ways they are accomplished” (2020). The community I needed were others who had also made the leap from a different understanding of the activity. With that view, I got introduced to Kaiser Ahmed, a Bangladeshi national working at ISU who showed utmost integrity in helping me to find

an apartment. He went out of his way to do things like contacting the leasing agencies, and even visiting their offices in person, but nothing went our way.

Simultaneously, I also got to know some new students who were to join ISU in the Fall of 2021. Among them, one name that really stood out was my friend, Mohammad Akbar Hossain, a PhD student in the English Department at ISU who was also planning to come with his family this Fall. I spent hours after hours of virtual conversation with him discussing the ways of finding affordable accommodation. Another Facebook group I got connected with was *ISU Fall 21* which was basically the group of the new students from Bangladesh coming to ISU this year. They shared some useful stuff, but it was insufficient for my goal of finding an apartment.

By the end of July 2021, I reached Normal, but my suffering did not end here. We started living in a hotel with very little or no hope of getting an apartment within the next couple of weeks at least. My desperate search continued. The only significant change that occurred was in the method and process of searching. It was nothing but a shift from purely online to a mixed method—both online and in person. But one thing I must mention here is that I never stopped visiting different leasing agencies. By that time, I had done some more preliminary research about renting an apartment. While researching, I tried to find answers to the following questions.

1. Who should I talk to and consult with to get a true picture about the current situation of housing?
2. What tools do I need to use in securing housing for myself?

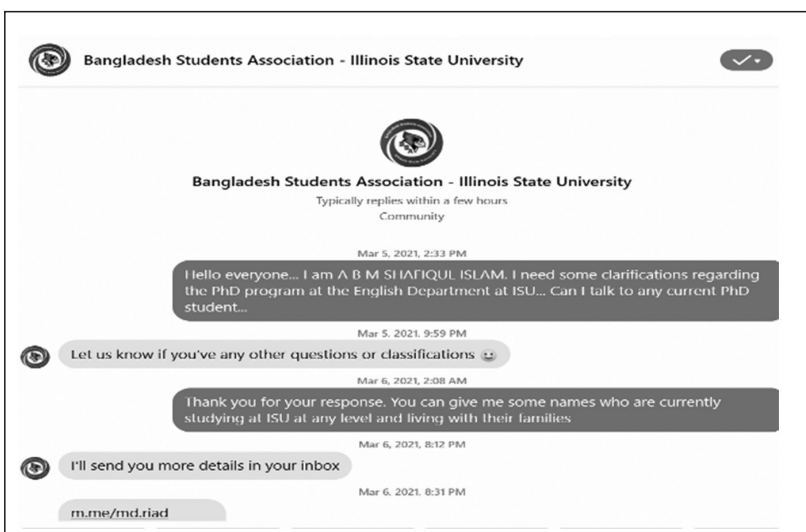


Figure 3: I got connected with a Facebook group called *Bangladeshi Students Association (BSA)* at ISU that provided me with some other names of students.

3. Are there any local traditions about housing in Illinois that I should take care of?
4. What are the documented and unspoken rules in dealing with managing housing as an international student?

When I looked for answers to the above questions, I discovered a pattern of researching which I think can be compared to other kinds of literate activities people might engage in when engaging in a new situation or new ways of writing. **Literate activity**—another ISU writing program concept—refers to all the things that people do when they produce and use different kinds of writing in the world. Thus, literate activities exist in different rhetorical situations.

For me, finding housing was akin to producing a new kind of writing or a type of text or genre. The act of writing does not merely refer to the process of converting the ideas and concepts into pages in alphabetical forms; rather it incorporates many other contextual forces ranging from personal, physical, mental to social and community level collaboration. So, writing can never be seen as an isolated activity; instead, we always need to acknowledge how writing as an activity draws on influences from sources from the outside world. It is necessary to mention that my search for housing as a literate activity has its goal, which happens in real time, incorporates



Figure 4: Another Facebook group named ISU Fall 21. Here, most of the conversations are in Bangla, my mother tongue. Our discussions went to a variety of directions but mainly centered around housing, air tickets, and COVID-19 protocol for travel requirements.

different representations of literacies, uses various tools, and seeks help and information from many people (a community). For all the above reasons, I love to call it a **literate activity** (or maybe an activity that required many new literacies). For a person to reach their goals in a particular activity system (like house hunting) all the components which are interdependent in nature need to work coherently—and that can include a lot of research, learning and communicating.

The (Finally!) Successful House Search Activity System

In an activity system, the subject is one who carries out the action. The object and objective is the purpose or goal for which the activity is being carried out. In this case, I was the subject whose objective was to find a place to live in Normal. The tools I needed to be successful included many things, like browsing the Internet, talking to friends, communicating with leasing agents, visiting their offices in Normal, filling out an application, paying the application fees, and more.

In my activity, the community for the task consists of the people and the student population living in Normal, Illinois. So, for carrying out an activity, the sociocultural context and its rules and regulations also play a pivotal role. The ISU Writing Program adheres to the idea that any/every piece of writing/rhetorical activity is a complex artifact—one that was not created in a vacuum but was instead molded and shaped by the person who created it, the people who received it, and the environment in which it was created and received (“Nursing Care Plans”). Since I was new to Normal, I had to get myself used to the underlying norms and implications (both explicit and implicit) to identify the things that this particular rhetoric situation requires.

Once I reached Normal, I got a little orientation to that culture and came to know what sort of processes I should follow to find my place. Then, I contacted people across various nationalities living in Normal. This is where the **transcultural** aspect started to play its part. In transcultural writing, nearly all humans are communicating across cultural boundaries and our communications constantly blend different linguistic and cultural traditions and specific, socially constructed ways of thinking. When I contacted people to ask for help, some people offered excuses or weren’t able to be helpful. But a few of them expressed genuine interest and inclination to help me. In this regard, I must mention one name. She is Moumita Saha, an outgoing grad student at ISU from Bangladesh, whose immense help was unforgettable. She was the one whom almost all the new Bangladeshi students approached for help. Before coming to the US, I had some phone conversations with



Figure 5: Moumita in front of the First Site office in Normal.

her to discuss the matter. Her friend, Shuvro, another Bangladeshi student, was always with her. They visited almost all the leasing agencies located in Normal and Bloomington to see if there was any available apartment for me to immediately move to. After my arrival to Normal, our efforts continued, though nothing was working in my favor. When I asked Moumita, “Why is there a huge crisis of accommodation in Normal this year”? This was her reply.

“You know, it seems to be quite unprecedented here in Normal. Family apartments always remain available all the year round. Usually, it does not take even a week to secure a two-bedroom apartment for a family. But this year, the scenario is totally different. It is because a new car industry called Rivian just started operating in this area for which there has been a huge influx of people coming from outside to live in the city. Moreover, you contacted me quite late and by that time, almost all the apartments within your budget range have been rented”.

To find a way out, we never stopped meeting people and talking to them to figure out what course of action could be followed. It was also to ascertain what more things I needed to do, what documents I should have, what time of the year would be the best to look for housing, what type of housing would be available within a limited budget etc. This kind of dialogue has always a place in the activity system. Though my activity of finding housing does not have any direct connection with producing a particular text, it involves the reasons why and how the contexts are important in understanding a particular activity. For me, this activity of research was to identify the whole process of getting an apartment, particularly for students coming to ISU for study. In a literate activity, a writer accomplishes a set of activities like doing research, knowing the sociocultural context, setting the goal etc., while producing a particular text. This means that literacies do not occur only on pages in the form of alphabetical text; rather, they exist and occur everywhere even if we are unaware of them.

Besides Moumita and Shuvro, I personally talked to many other American leasing agents. They always advised me to keep an eye on their websites (Young America, First Site, SAMI, Core3, Class Act, Dowd Properties). When any apartment appeared available on the website, I directly contacted that leasing agency either by going to their office or calling

them. The only piece of advice they came up with was to apply for that apartment, and each application cost no less than twenty-five dollars. But the problem was that there was always at least one who had already applied for the same apartment, and I was on the waiting list. Though I was physically present here in the US, there were certain activities I needed to do online. By that time, I had already stayed in the hotel for more than a month.



Figure 6: Crestwood Apartments where I finally managed my housing.

One fine morning, I got a phone call from Moumita who informed me about a vacant Crestwood apartment and asked me to come to the First Site office immediately. Without any delay, I rushed to the office where I found her engaged in conversation with one of the leasing agents. On the same day, I applied for it and got the confirmation call in the afternoon. That confirmation call from the agent seemed to me one of the sweetest voices I had ever heard.

After a collective effort, I finally got a place, although there were still some more texts that needed to be produced. Once I signed the leasing agreement and paid a one-month deposit, I was handed over the key to the apartment. After going through such trials and tribulations for about two months, I was able to move to the new apartment on the 14th of September. This transition brought my almost two-month long suffering to an end. What a great relief for me and my family! That feeling was like the feeling of being at 'home.' While exploring the literate activity of finding housing both online and in person, I engaged with the activities that are summarized as following:

1. Researching what kinds of housing options are available
2. Looking at the key features like price, size, distance, date of availability, neighborhood, etc.
3. Choosing the most suitable one
4. Applying online
5. Paying the nonrefundable application fee and submitting proof of income
6. Waiting for the outcomes to be communicated by the leasing agent

7. Apartment jointly visited by the leasing agent and the tenant before finalizing
8. If everything goes well, a leasing agreement needs to be signed
9. Handing over the key and the checklist
10. Getting the Electricity and Gas connection (For electricity, need to contact Ameren and for Gas, need to contact Nicor)
11. Returning the checklist to the housing agent after inspecting if anything still to be repaired
12. Getting into the apartment

I had to complete all the above activities to secure my housing. It is quite similar to the various processes a writer always engages in to produce a genre or text. The end product often doesn't show the evidence of all the work a person might engage in to get there. The process I went through was difficult, frustrating, and even harrowing at times, as the days ticked by and we sat in our hotel, but in the end, I was successful. And I learned a lot about America, and about Bloomington-Normal, as well as about the activity system of house hunting. As Edmund Ankomah (2020) rightly says, in his *Grassroots Journal* article about learning to navigate cold weather as an international student from a warm country, "understanding how a particular genre works, engaging with all its moving parts can be very rewarding for other literate activities we engage in."

Works Cited

- Ankomah, E. (2020) Snowpiercer: Preparing for Winter as an Activity System. *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 11.1, 47–59.
- Hengst, J. A. (2020) *Understanding Everyday Communicative Interactions: Introduction to Situated Discourse Analysis for Communication Sciences and Disorders*. Routledge, New York & London.
- Miller, Carolyn. (1984) "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 70.2.
- ISU Writing Program. (2015) "Key Terms and Concepts." *Grassroots Writing Research*, 2015 September 22, <http://isuwriting.com/key-terms/>

A Note on Resources: Although I didn't end up citing the following *Grassroots Journal* articles in my piece, I want to note that I used them as a resource to help me think about my writing as I engage in the activity system of "writing a *GWRJ* article." But that's another story. . .

***GWRJ* articles Consulted:**

- Sheaffer, H. (2019). "Try not to Die: The Climbing Gym as a Death Prevention Activity System." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 10.1, 121–132.
- Sheets, A. (2015). Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap Written." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 5.1, 121–138.
- Turman, C. (2019). "Writing the Role: Role-playing Games as Literate Activity." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 10.1, 133–140.
- Jacques, W. (2016). "The E-Cat's Meow: Exploring Activity in Translingual Mobile Gaming." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 7.1, 9–17.
- Mool, A. (2020). "Exploring the Roles in the Activity System of Community Theatre." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 10.2, 27–36.
- Pierce, K. (2020). "Behind the Silver Screen: The Movie Theater as an Activity System." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 11.1, 35–45.
- Hancock, L. (2020). "From Noob to Veteran in League of Legends: Activity Systems and Genre Analysis in Video Games." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, Issue 11.1, 9–23.
- Walker, J. (2010) "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, 71–80.



Shafiq Islam is a PhD Student and writing program Instructor in the Department of English at Illinois State university. He is originally from Bangladesh. Before being admitted to ISU, Mr. Shafiq worked for more than a decade as lecturer in English at King Khalid University and Jazan University, two state-run universities in Saudi Arabia. ELT, TESOL and sociolinguistics are his primary areas of interest. He loves spending quality time with his family and friends.