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A Classification of Genre Families in University Student Writing

Abstract

As demand for English-medium higher education continues to grow internationally and participation in higher education increases, the need for a better understanding of academic writing is pressing. Prior university-wide taxonomies of student writing have relied on intuition, the opinions of faculty, or data from course documentation and task prompts. In our research we classify a broad range of the writing actually produced by university students for assessment purposes. To make such a description manageable, we grouped the texts in the BAWE corpus into thirteen genre families. This project brings together the American tradition of classifying university student writing tasks (e.g. Horowitz 1986; Hale et al. 2004) and the very different Australian tradition of classifying primary and secondary school children's written texts as genres (e.g. Martin and Rothery 1986; Coffin 2004). An understanding of the genre family classification enables effective interrogation of the corpus by teachers and researchers. The diversity in student genres across disciplines and years of study is noteworthy for academic writing textbook developers and all interested in the nature of higher education. [174]

Introduction

As is well known, student numbers and student mobility are both on the increase worldwide. In Britain, there has been a steady rise in the total number of university students over the past twenty years (HEFCE 2001; HESA 2009), and Wächter (2008) cites UNESCO data indicating that the number of international students globally grew more than fourfold between 1975 and 2005, from 600,000 to 2.7 million. Because so many international students are on the move, more universities in countries where English is not a first or official language are offering courses in the medium of English. Wächter and Maiworm's (2008) survey of 2,200 higher education institutions in non-English speaking European countries, for example, found that 38% now offer English-speaking programmes, the majority created since 2003. These developments have increased the need for information about the nature of student writing in English - a need that applied linguists have been slow to meet. Very little empirical investigation has taken place regarding the varieties of writing produced by students during their university education, probably because the collection of a representative body of proficient student writing is fraught with difficulty (Alsop and Author 2009). At present, we believe that the BAWE corpus (1) is the only archived collection of assignments produced across a wide range of disciplines and across the first four levels of university study (2).

In this paper we begin by reviewing some existing classifications of primary, secondary and tertiary level student writing. Although classification is only one of many concerns in the study of academic writing, prior classification systems have been very influential, informing writing materials, raising awareness of writing demands, leading to changes in educational curricula and expectations, and inspiring significant research traditions with international impact.

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3 Following this review, we present our own classification of university student
4 writing genre families in the BAWE corpus, with details of each genre family and
5 discussion of the potential of such work.
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10 **Classifications of school student writing**

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12 Text classification is often used by educationalists as a means of allocating writing
13 tasks across age groups and levels of study, on the basis of how well a category suits a
14 learner's developmental stage. It can thus inform the design of teaching materials and
15 syllabi, and may also bring about widespread changes in teaching across continents
16 and educational sectors.
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24 One particularly influential classification was that devised by Britton et al.
25 (1975), which distinguished between 'expressive', 'transactional' and 'poetic'
26 functions of language, and argued that the expressive function was critical in
27 encouraging development and exploration. Britton et al.'s analysis of over 2000 texts
28 in British secondary schools revealed that student writing across the curriculum was
29 more than 60% transactional (expository and persuasive) and less than 6% expressive.
30 Recommendations that followed in Britain and internationally were successful in
31 increasing the amount of personal, expressive writing produced in schools, in the
32 belief that this would lead to improvement in the quality of students' writing in
33 general.
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48 In time there was a reaction to what many now perceive as an over-emphasis
49 on expression at the expense of other functions of literacy. The analysis by Rothery
50 and Martin of 1500 texts representing all writing done by children at one school in the
51 Sydney region (Martin 1989:53) revealed that almost all the children's writing was
52 narrative/expressive rather than factual. Martin argued that, far from preparing
53 children for the demands of secondary school, the neglect of transactional genres was
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1
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3 preventing the development of necessary literacy skills. The internationally influential
4 classification of key primary school genres developed by Martin and Rothery
5
6 informed pedagogy and ‘by the mid-1990s genre based descriptions of language ...
7
8 were a feature of primary school language syllabuses in most states in Australia’
9
10
11
12 (Veel 2006:73).

13
14
15 In Australian educational linguistics, genre is widely regarded as ‘the system
16
17 of staged goal-oriented social processes through which social subjects in a given
18
19 culture live their lives’ (Martin 1997:13). So in presenting to teachers ‘eight genres
20
21 for writing across the curriculum in secondary schools’, Macken-Horarik (2002:21-3)
22
23 not only provides the social purpose and schematic structure of genres such as
24
25 Recount, and News Report, but also indicates the ‘Social Location’ – where we might
26
27 find them. Thus Recounts ‘retell events for the purpose of informing or entertaining’;
28
29 they unfold from an Orientation stage through a Record of Events stage to an optional
30
31 Re-orientation stage (Orientation^Record of Events^(Re-orientation)) and they can be
32
33 found in personal letters, police records and excursion ‘write-ups’. Explanations are
34
35 found in environmental and healthcare leaflets, while Procedures are found in
36
37 gardening books and cookbooks, and Narratives are found in novels and movies.
38
39 These accounts are underpinned by research from the *Write it Right* project in Sydney
40
41 (Martin 2000; Unsworth 2000; Veel 2006) which examined secondary school
42
43 textbooks and assignments in English, History, Science, Mathematics and Geography,
44
45 providing detailed genre maps which help explain relationships between genres in
46
47 subject contexts. Thus in History the genres ‘Descriptive Report’, ‘Taxonomic
48
49 Report’ and ‘Historical Account’ are classed as instances of ‘reporting history’.
50
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58 Such subject specific classifications suggest linguistic and cognitive learner
59
60 pathways through genres; Coffin (2004) shows how lexical density, grammatical

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2
3 metaphor, abstract/institutional participants and causal relations develop from
4
5 'reporting' genres through 'explaining' genres to the linguistically and cognitively
6
7 more demanding 'arguing' genres such as Exposition and Discussion. Such pathways
8
9 are useful for teachers (Custance 2006) and remind us that genres are realised through
10
11 language. They also strike a chord with our interest in the intersection of corpus
12
13 linguistics and genre analysis for classifying writing in higher education: analyses of
14
15 register variation in the BAWE corpus reveal similar progressions in lexico-
16
17 grammatical features by year of study within and among genres and genre families
18
19 (Author 2008; Author 2009).

24 **University student writing**

26
27 As Loudermilk (2007) points out, university culture is such that students rarely show
28
29 their coursework to anyone other than their tutors, and the writing produced by
30
31 students therefore belongs in Swales' (1996) category of 'occluded' genres. It follows
32
33 that large representative samples of student writing are much more difficult to obtain
34
35 than large representative samples of some other types of academic text, such as
36
37 research articles and instructional material. The published research article is a
38
39 particularly popular choice of genre for academic writing research, both because of its
40
41 widespread availability, and because it is amenable to detailed analysis following the
42
43 standard 'Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion' (IMRD) framework, as in studies
44
45 by Swales (1981), Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988), Holmes (1997), Bloor (1999)
46
47 and Lewin, Fine and Young (2001) amongst others. Perhaps for this reason many
48
49 studies of academic writing have taken the research article as a model for the sort of
50
51 writing that students aspire to produce (see, for example, Lee and Swales 2006, where
52
53 research articles are compared to doctoral students' term papers and dissertation
54
55 drafts). Other researchers have focussed on the language of textbooks and course
56
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1
2
3 materials; for example Biber's work on university writing (e.g. Biber 2006) draws on
4
5 the T2K-SWAL Corpus, which consists largely of instructional material.
6
7

8 As we have previously argued, however (Author and Author 2006),
9
10 assignments differ from research genres and from instructional material in significant
11
12 respects. Where research genres aim to persuade the reader of the validity of new
13
14 findings, and textbooks aim to explain or instruct, assignments generally aim to
15
16 demonstrate the acquisition of required skills and accepted knowledge.
17
18

19
20 A number of studies have examined the generic features of the dissertation and
21
22 the thesis. These are not only somewhat less occluded genres than coursework
23
24 assignments, but also longer and more readily available, so that researchers can gather
25
26 more text, more easily, from fewer students. For example Samraj (2008) examines
27
28 introductions to Masters dissertations, Charles (2006) describes MPhil and doctoral
29
30 theses, while Hyland and Tse (2004) analyse a substantial six discipline corpus of 240
31
32 dissertations and theses. Such studies suggest ways in which postgraduate student
33
34 research writing differs from research articles; it is reasonable to expect that the
35
36 differences between assessed coursework and professional writing will be even
37
38 greater. To date, however, most studies of student coursework, such as those of
39
40 Woodward-Kron (2002), Hewings (2004), North (2005), Ravelli (2004), Swain
41
42 (2007) and Hood (2007), have concentrated on relatively small numbers of texts in
43
44 one or two disciplines. Such studies certainly offer detailed disciplinary insights but
45
46 their attention to different linguistic features hampers comparisons across the
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48 academy.
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54 **Classifications of university student writing**

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56 Earlier classifications of university-wide writing have been based on findings from
57
58 literature reviews and reflection; from faculty surveys; and from course
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3 documentation. The more local classification studies tend to be conducted for needs
4
5 analyses to inform EAP and writing programme design (for example Zhu 2004;
6
7 Jackson, Meyer and Parkinson 2006; Cooper and Bikowski 2007; Gillett and
8
9 Hammond 2009), while those that gather larger quantities of information across
10
11 disciplines and universities tend to be linked to validations of the high stakes
12
13 university entrance examinations of TOEFL (Hale et al. 1996), the GRE (Rosenfeld,
14
15 Courtney and Fowles 2004), and IELTS (Moore and Morton 2005).
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19
20 A classification system that has been particularly influential in North
21
22 American Rhetoric and Composition practice is Kinneavy (1969). This synthesises
23
24 theories developed by earlier scholars dating back to the classical period, and
25
26 develops a model where four basic purposes of composition – expressive, persuasive,
27
28 referential and literary -are linked neatly to the four components of a communicative
29
30 event – encoder, decoder, reality and signal respectively. Further classification of
31
32 referential discourse distinguishes between exploratory discourse which asks a
33
34 question, informative discourse which answers it, and scientific discourse which
35
36 proves the answer (1969:301). Kinneavy aimed to theorise the nature of rhetoric and
37
38 communication a priori, rather than classify actual university student writing across
39
40 the university. His system, while providing a possible frame for empirical
41
42 investigations of academic writing, has been criticised for prescriptivism, for example
43
44 by Swales (1990:42) who admired its organising power but warned that ‘the
45
46 propensity for early categorisation can lead to a failure to understand particular
47
48 discourses on their own terms’.
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54

55 A more empirical approach to classification involves seeking information from
56
57 university teachers. Many such surveys (e.g. Bridgeman and Carlson 1984; Casanave
58
59 and Hubbard 1992) were conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Paltridge
60

1
2
3 2002:80 for details); more recent evidence comes from 137 British academics
4
5 (Ganobscik-Williams 2004), 1,512 American academics (Rosenfeld et al. 2004), and
6
7 47 science academics in South Africa (Jackson et al. 2006). These studies identify not
8
9 only types of writing that students produce, but also core tasks and skills that lecturers
10
11 value and expect to find in students' written work. With similar aims we interviewed
12
13 58 British university lecturers (Author and Author 2006) and developed an
14
15 understanding of the functions of university writing from disciplinary perspectives.
16
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19
20 The third main approach to classification involves analyses of course
21
22 documentation and assignment rubrics. Horowitz (1986) was an early influential study
23
24 which divided 54 assignment tasks from an American university into seven
25
26 categories. More recent and larger-scale studies include Hale et al.'s examination of
27
28 assignment questions and interview data from eight American universities (1996),
29
30 Moore and Morton's study of tasks from 28 departments in two Australian
31
32 universities (2005), Zhu's work on 95 syllabi with course handouts, writing samples
33
34 and interviews from an American business school (2004), Cooper and Bikowski's
35
36 analysis of 200 syllabi at one American university (2007), and Gillett and Hammond's
37
38 account of 800 module descriptors at one British university (2009).
39
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43
44 Many of these studies identify similar lists of main task types, although the
45
46 number varies, influenced by disciplines under consideration and classification
47
48 criteria (such as information source, rhetorical function, genre, and/or the object of
49
50 inquiry). The lists typically include annotated bibliographies, case studies, essays,
51
52 experimental reports, proposals, reflection papers, research papers, reviews, and
53
54 summaries of or reactions to reading materials. It is difficult, however, to synthesise
55
56 the findings from different surveys, because of the different criteria and because
57
58 category names mean different things in different contexts, as Braine (1995) and Zhu
59
60

1
2
3 (2004) point out, particularly where assignment types are identified ‘by the name
4 given to the required written product as outlined in the task rubric, i.e. whether
5 students were asked to write an essay, a literature review, etc.’ (Moore and Morton
6 2005:50). Even within the same discipline, descriptions and naming practices can be
7 inconsistent and unreliable: ‘Some genres, particularly in pedagogical contexts, are
8 loosely, and almost casually, named’ (Johns 1997:23). Without samples of the writing
9 produced it is impossible to know what differences, if any, exist between ‘researched
10 term paper’ and ‘scholarly article’, for example, or between ‘book report’ and ‘book
11 review’, as reported by Ganobscik-Williams (2004:14).
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25 Some researchers have tried to avoid the confusion of overlapping terms by
26 adopting categories devised by earlier researchers. Thus Cooper and Bikowski (2007)
27 attempted to apply the categories of Horowitz (1986) and Hale et al. (1996), which
28 had originally been based on analyses of writing task prompts and hypotheses about
29 the way students might respond to them. Ultimately, however, Cooper and Bikowski
30 were not sure whether their findings differed from those of the earlier studies because
31 they had made different classification decisions, or because there were actual
32 differences in the types of texts expected. Jackson et al. (2006) asked their
33 questionnaire respondents to identify task types from a pre-selected list based on the
34 findings of Horowitz (1986) and Braine (1995). They admit that as a result ‘our
35 questionnaire was unable to account for the variety of labels and genres that exist
36 within science disciplines’ (2006:274).
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53 These surveys have proved useful in the development of complex, multi-
54 dimensional classifications, and have increased significantly in scope. Whereas in the
55 1980s Horowitz worked with only 38 usable responses from 750 faculty contacts,
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1
2
3 twenty years later Gillett and Hammond were able to access electronically-stored
4
5 course and module proposals to record every task type set within a given time frame.
6
7

8 As can be seen, however, survey-based typologies rely on official documents
9
10 and nomenclature rather than descriptions of the writing students actually produce.
11
12 Zhu (2004) is the only one to incorporate some text analysis, but examines a mere 12
13
14 writing samples, as opposed to 242 assignment tasks described in handouts and course
15
16 syllabi. Without access to the texts produced in response to the task prompts,
17
18 researchers have to rely on faculty and course developers' genre expectations, which
19
20 may not all be realised. Corpus projects have not so far described the total written
21
22 output of a student body, and thus cannot provide such accurate accounts of the
23
24 quantity and distribution of writing tasks, but they can reveal much more about the
25
26 linguistic features of student writing genres.
27
28
29
30

31 **Classification and Genre Families**

32
33 We aim to develop a genre family framework which contends with 'the difficulty in
34
35 classifying writing assignments into neat, mutually exclusive categories' (Cooper and
36
37 Bikowski 2007:218). We consider both differentiating criteria and family
38
39 resemblances, aiming to group together genres that are similar (e.g. catering plans,
40
41 dissertation proposals and business proposals) to form genre families (in this case the
42
43 Proposal family), so that all texts in the BAWE corpus can be assigned to one and
44
45 only one family. Grouping similar genres together makes the description of large
46
47 numbers of texts more manageable, and enables us to make comparisons across
48
49 disciplines. Thus, following a similar approach to that employed by Bhatia (2002:280-
50
51 1) to create 'colonies' of promotional genres, we place book reviews from History
52
53 with product evaluations from Engineering in a genre family we label 'Critique'
54
55 because both genres share a similar educational purpose and have similar generic
56
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58
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3 stages: description of an entity and principled evaluation of the entity. A more
4
5 detailed description of each genre is expected to reveal disciplinary differences -
6
7
8 Critiques in some disciplines, for instance, include reports of extensive testing – but
9
10 there is nevertheless sufficient family resemblance among members of the group to
11
12 enable us to argue that they are members of the Critique genre family and not
13
14 members of any other genre family.
15
16

17
18 Unlike some accounts of genre, we have not given exclusive priority to
19
20 communicative purpose and prefer to present it as a complex notion. Thus we
21
22 recognise that in an educational context the purpose of assessed student writing is a
23
24 combination of demonstrating proficiency to the tutor, developing writing proficiency,
25
26 and engaging an audience or reader who may be more or less explicit. In our
27
28 interviews with lecturers (Author and Author 2006) we developed an understanding of
29
30 the relative importance of the purposes of specific assignments, describing them as
31
32 essentially pedagogical, professional or academic-research. From this perspective,
33
34 essays and exercises have a central pedagogical purpose, unlike case reports in
35
36 Medicine, site investigation reports in Engineering, project proposals in Publishing,
37
38 and appeals in Law which all have the same broad purpose of preparing students for
39
40 writing in professional contexts. Our classification of genre families captures these
41
42 broad purposes, but is more specific in its focus not only in terms of educational
43
44 purpose, but also in terms of the staging or schematic structure which conventionally
45
46 realises that purpose in our corpus.
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52
53 We should state that while we have read all the texts in our corpus and identified
54
55 each as belonging to one specific genre family, we have not yet completed full genre
56
57 descriptions. This work is ongoing. Our classification of genre families is presented
58
59 here for us and others to interrogate through application to further student writing
60

1
2
3 texts. We believe it is adequate for our corpus, which is diverse and substantial, but
4
5 we welcome feedback from those applying it to different corpora. This, of course, is
6
7 the shortcoming of empirical studies such as ours: theoretical possibilities may have
8
9 been excluded because they were not found in the data examined.
10
11

12 **Methodology**

13
14 The contents of the BAWE corpus are described in Alsop and Author (2009) with
15
16 reference to a four by four matrix of levels (from first year undergraduate to Masters)
17
18 and disciplinary groupings (Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences and
19
20 Physical Sciences). Our sampling strategy took care to maintain an even distribution
21
22 of assignments across the four levels and four disciplinary groups, and to ensure that
23
24 individual disciplines, courses, modules or students were not over-represented within
25
26 the matrix. The corpus only contains assignments formally assessed by subject tutors
27
28 and given a good pass grade, and is made up of almost equal numbers of ‘distinction’
29
30 level assignments with a grade of 70% or over (1,251 assignments) and ‘merit’ level
31
32 assignments with a grade of between 60% and 70% (1,402 assignments). We assume
33
34 that writing of this standard will tend to contain the generic features desired by the
35
36 disciplinary communities.
37
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43 We relied on students to voluntarily contribute their work, and with the aim of
44
45 developing an electronic corpus of student writing collected word-processed
46
47 assignments, excluding handwritten examination scripts, assignments consisting
48
49 solely of mathematical calculations and Powerpoint presentations assessed through
50
51 oral delivery. For these reasons we cannot claim to have gathered proportionate
52
53 quantities of every type of assignment set in every discipline in the four universities
54
55 concerned. Nevertheless, the corpus holdings are indicative of actual student writing
56
57 practices across disciplines and levels of study.
58
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1
2
3 Table 1 provides an overview of the corpus contents. As some assignments
4
5
6 comprise several autonomous texts (for example a collection of several lab reports),
7
8 there are more texts than assignments.
9

10
11
12 TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE
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14
15

16
17 In order to derive the genre families we read all the texts in the corpus and assigned
18
19 each of them provisionally to a genre category. We then grouped all those with
20
21 similar purpose(s), regardless of discipline, following Swales and Martin in the
22
23 primacy given to purpose. During the categorisation process we paid attention to the
24
25 macrostructure of the genres and worked to differentiate genre families according to
26
27 their expected stages. As Prosser and Webb (1994:131) point out, 'successful essays
28
29 reveal their organisational pattern explicitly'; in our corpus organisational patterns
30
31 were often revealed through the use of section headings (Author and Holmes 2009),
32
33 through an introduction with a projecting move, and through a conclusion containing
34
35 a move reviewing what has been achieved. Our classification was therefore grounded
36
37 in the corpus data, and is open to future challenge, either from assignments collected
38
39 in other contexts, or from more detailed analyses of individual genres.
40
41
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43
44

45 The genre families we call Case Study, Critique and Explanation illustrate the
46
47 way our system works. A defining feature of Case Studies is the inclusion of
48
49 recommendations, while Critiques include evaluation as central, and Explanations
50
51 offer a more neutral explanation. Assignments in all three genre families might
52
53 include a description of a business, for example, so the determining factor for
54
55 classification is not the information content of this description, but its main purpose.
56
57 This allows us to compare business evaluations with book reviews, or Case Studies of
58
59
60

1
2
3 businesses with Case Studies of medical patients, thus providing a big picture of
4
5 university student writing across topics and disciplines.
6
7

8 **The Genre Families Classification**

9
10 Table 2 describes each of the 13 genre families identified in terms of their purpose
11
12 and generic structure. The first column gives labels for each family. These were
13
14 inspired by the Systemic Functional literature (e.g. Recount, Explanation), by the New
15
16 Literacies literature (Lea and Street 2000) (Empathy writing), by academic disciplines
17
18 (Case Study, Essay, Problem Question, Research Report, Exercise, Literature Survey,
19
20 Proposal), or were simply chosen as suitable superordinate terms (the Critique genre
21
22 family includes reviews and evaluations, for example).
23
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25

26
27 The second column first gives the educational or social purpose; this may
28
29 include an assessment purpose such as ‘to demonstrate understanding’ to examiners,
30
31 as well as a broader pedagogical purpose such as ‘to develop understanding’ in
32
33 students. The second paragraph indicates the generic structure or schematic structure
34
35 through which the genres unfold. The stages are fairly general, and descriptions of
36
37 specific genres will vary in the detail of these stages, but they are important for
38
39 distinguishing between genre families. The only genre family whose members do not
40
41 share a common generic structure is Empathy Writing.
42
43
44

45
46 We know from the interviews we conducted with university lecturers that some
47
48 genres are designed to prepare students for similar writing in their future professional
49
50 lives. Where genres approximate to professional writing, the genre network is
51
52 identified in the third paragraph of the second column. This also contains observations
53
54 about how some genres may be embedded or reappear in other genres, forming ‘genre
55
56 sets’ (Devitt 1991). An important purpose of some of the less complex genres is to
57
58 prepare students for the more elaborate genres encountered later in their education.
59
60

1
2
3 Thus a lab report in the Methodology Recount family might be recontextualised as a
4 discrete component of a Research Report which also includes other sections; the
5
6 nature of the experiment reported might be very different, but the lab report
7
8 component of the Research Report remains similar in structure and purpose to the lab
9
10 report as an autonomous assignment. Research Reports may also contain stages that
11
12 correspond to Literature Surveys; similarly, Explanations may be embedded in
13
14 Critiques.
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22 TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE

23
24 Finally in the third column are examples of genres that belong to each family.
25
26 The labels for these are typically taken from the discourse community, though we
27
28 have modified some to capture their generic structure and purpose to avoid the pitfall
29
30 of earlier classification studies which relied on departmental naming practices. We
31
32 have distinguished between business explanations, business evaluations and company
33
34 reports, for example, all of which might be labelled ‘case studies’ or ‘reports’ in the
35
36 disciplinary community. In our system, the first of these genres explains how a
37
38 business works, the second may offer a critical assessment of a business model, and
39
40 the third is forward looking, beginning with an executive summary and including
41
42 specific recommendations for business strategy.
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48 **The Variety of Genre Families across the University**

49
50 The student writing guide by Creme and Lea (1997) suggests that ‘one of the most
51
52 difficult things to learn about being a university student is how to tackle the variety of
53
54 different written assignments that you will be asked to complete throughout the
55
56 course’ (1997:25). This variety applies more to some disciplines than others. For
57
58 instance, a comparison of History and Engineering shows History students writing
59
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1
2
3 essays and book reviews, while Engineering students face at least 15 different genres
4
5 (Author 2008). Table 3 shows how the spread of genre families varies across
6
7
8 disciplinary groups in the BAWE corpus.
9

10 11 12 13 TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE

14
15 Essays appear in all groups, endorsing Warburton's view that 'whatever you study, at
16
17 some point you will be asked to write an essay' (2006:7). While they represent more
18
19 than 80% of assignments in Arts and Humanities, a far wider range of genres is
20
21 required of students in the Physical and Life Sciences, a fact often ignored by the
22
23 authors of academic writing textbooks, who tend to emphasise the development of
24
25 'essayist literacy' (Tribble 2009:411) and focus on the soft pure genres at the expense
26
27 of science, engineering and professional genres (Gillett and Hammond 2009). The
28
29 claim in Thoreau's textbook, for example, that 'if you know about two essay genres,
30
31 you will have a good foundation for tertiary study' (2005:29), is at odds with the
32
33 preponderance of Methodology Recounts in the BAWE science groupings, and the
34
35 high numbers of Case Studies and Critiques in the Life Sciences and the Social
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41 Sciences.
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44 In Table 4 we see that while Essay is the largest category at all levels, there are
45
46 more Essays and Explanations in the corpus at level one; significantly more
47
48 Methodology Recounts in levels one and two; more Design Specifications, Empathy
49
50 Writing and Research Reports at level three; and more Case Studies, Proposals and
51
52 Critiques at level four. The numbers here are indicative rather than statistically
53
54 representative, as mentioned previously. The findings for level four are also affected
55
56 by the prevalence of Case Studies among the assignments collected from the graduate
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1
2
3 intake medical school, and the fact that we did not include Masters dissertations in the
4
5 corpus (most of which would belong in the Research Report genre family).
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10 TABLE FOUR ABOUT HERE
11

12 It is also possible to infer pedagogical reasons for these patterns of distribution,
13
14 however. Explanations are intended to demonstrate knowledge and develop
15
16 understanding of an entity, issue or method, and are therefore particularly suitable for
17
18 students embarking on a new course of study. They feature heavily in science
19
20 disciplines, including those, such as agriculture, which are not standard school
21
22 subjects. Critiques differ from Explanations in that they include a discipline-specific
23
24 evaluative component indicative of higher levels of study and greater command of the
25
26 subject matter. Design Specifications and Empathy Writing are very much geared
27
28 towards future employment, and are therefore most relevant to final-year
29
30 undergraduates; Design Specifications address design and manufacturing needs, while
31
32 Empathy Writing provides practice in communicating with a lay readership outside
33
34 the confines of the university. Design Specifications and Methodology Recounts are
35
36 also stepping stones towards the more advanced Research Report, which is likely to
37
38 include experimental components. Case Studies and Proposals reflect the professional
39
40 orientation of many Masters courses, where workplace genres often replace the more
41
42 pedagogical genres such as the Essay, which rarely occur outside the academy.
43
44 Further research on genre mapping (cf Custance 2006) is needed to explain how these
45
46 trends are realised in specific courses of study.
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55 Figure 1 shows how the genre families are distributed across the corpus by both
56
57 disciplinary group and level of study. In addition to the general trends in each
58
59 disciplinary group towards greater genre family variation at each successive level of
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2
3 study, we can see the dominance of Essays in Arts and Humanities (AH) as well as in
4
5 Social Science (SS), compared to the significant role of Explanations in Life Sciences
6
7 (LS), and of Design Specifications in Physical Sciences (PS).
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13 **FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE**
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15
16 Of course much more work could be done here to explore the complex
17
18 intertextualities among university assignments, across disciplines and years of study.
19
20 Remnants of earlier texts may surface in later texts, and rhetorical structures may
21
22 replicate themselves (Devitt 1991). How the structures of occluded genres emerge and
23
24 stabilise is an intriguing question, given that students have little access to exemplars
25
26 of the genre other than their own earlier attempts. Many genres in the initial stages of
27
28 higher education are likely to be transformations of school genres, influenced,
29
30 perhaps, by the rhetorical patterns of instructional material, although course outlines
31
32 and writing task prompts may not in fact play much part in genre formation,
33
34 particularly where, as Haggis (2006:524) describes, they are insufficiently explicit to
35
36 usefully inform the novice writer.
37
38
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40
41 **Implications and conclusions**
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43
44 Gillett and Hammond (2009) complain of the relatively narrow range of activities and
45
46 techniques covered in study skills manuals, and the lack of 'comment or advice on the
47
48 purpose and function of the wide range of academic activities demanded of students
49
50 (in the name of assessment) in their various subjects of study' (2009:112). Tribble
51
52 (2009:416) echoes this criticism in his comparison of 27 popular academic writing
53
54 textbooks: 'For students who face the challenge of writing extended, factual,
55
56 evidence-based and disciplinary specific texts, there is still relatively little on the
57
58 market'. This neglect of important pedagogic higher education genres is probably at
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3 least in part due to the failure of applied linguists to describe actual genres in as
4
5 extensive a manner as Australian accounts of pedagogic genres in primary and
6
7 secondary schools.
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10 The classification of the BAWE corpus texts into thirteen genre families offers
11
12 a breakthrough in terms of the research methods used to develop university-wide
13
14 classifications of student writing. Having drawn on tutors, students and departmental
15
16 documentation to develop an emic understanding of the educational purposes of
17
18 written assignments, we examined several thousand texts. Rather than focusing on
19
20 individual genres and disciplines, our classification draws attention to the similarities
21
22 and differences among assessed work across disciplines and disciplinary groups.
23
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26

27 In curriculum terms, our classification not only suggests ways of providing for
28
29 the writing instruction needs of students when several disciplines are represented
30
31 within the same class, but also suggests ways in which educators working within or
32
33 across disciplines can create assessment pathways for their students, using less
34
35 complex genres as a gateway to the more elaborate genres in which they may be
36
37 embedded. In these ways writing development and assessment may become more
38
39 manageable for EAP teachers, for those involved in benchmarking exercises across
40
41 faculties, and for others engaged in English medium education in Britain and
42
43 internationally.
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48 Moreover, an understanding of the classification and distribution of genre
49
50 families is essential for effective investigation of the BAWE corpus by teachers,
51
52 textbook writers and researchers. We know that academic language varies
53
54 significantly with genre and with discipline (Author 2009), and for these reasons, the
55
56 genre family and discipline of each assignment in the corpus are provided in its file
57
58 header, and can be viewed and used to filter corpus queries, for instance using *Sketch*
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60

1
2
3 *Engine* (3). In addition to searching online via the Sketch Engine open site, applied
4
5 linguists can request the entire corpus from the Oxford Text Archive (4) and use their
6
7
8 own corpus search techniques. In these ways further research on the corpus can
9
10 substantially reduce the occluded nature of student assignment genres.
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50 **Endnotes**

51
52
53 1. The British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus was developed at the
54 Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes under the directorship of
55 Author and Author (formerly of the Centre for Applied Linguistics [previously
56 called CELTE], Warwick), Paul Thompson (Department of Applied Linguistics,
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1
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3 Reading) and Paul Wickens (Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes), as
4
5 part of the project *An investigation of genres of assessed writing in British Higher*
6
7 *Education* which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (project
8
9 number RES-000-23-0800) from 2004 to 2007. We are grateful to the students who
10
11 contributed their work, without which the corpus would not exist.
12
13

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15 2. The Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP) is currently the
16
17 only other partially comparable corpus: it is smaller (around 830 texts and 2 million
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19 words) and only contains assignments by final-year undergraduates and graduate
20
21 students.
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25 3 . Kilgarriff, Rychly, Smrz and Tugwell (2004) describe *SketchEngine*, available at
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27 <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk/open/>.
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30 4. The British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus is resource #2539 in the
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32 Oxford Text Archive: <http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/headers/2539.xml>.
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Table 1. Overview of BAWE Corpus Holdings

		Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Total
Arts and Humanities Applied Linguistics, English, Philosophy, History, Classics, Archaeology, Comparative American Studies, Other	Students	101	83	61	23	268
	Assignments	239	228	160	78	705
	Texts	255	229	160	80	724
	Words	468,353	583,617	427,942	234,206	1,714,118
Life Sciences Biological Sciences, Agriculture, Food Sciences, Psychology, Health and Social Care, Medical Science	Students	74	71	42	46	233
	Assignments	180	193	113	197	683
	Texts	188	206	120	205	719
	Words	299,370	408,070	263,668	441,283	1,412,391
Physical Sciences Engineering, Chemistry, Computer Science, Physics, Mathematics, Meteorology, Cybernetics & Electronics, Planning, Architecture	Students	73	60	56	36	225
	Assignments	181	149	156	110	596
	Texts	181	154	156	133	624
	Words	300,989	314,331	426,431	339,605	1,381,356
Social Sciences Business, Law, Sociology, Politics, Economics, Hospitality Leisure & Tourism, Management, Other, Anthropology, Publishing	Students	85	88	75	62	313¹
	Assignments	207	197	162	202	777¹
	Texts	216	198	166	202	791¹
	Words	371,473	475,668	440,674	688,921	1,999,130¹
Total students		333	302	234	167	1039¹
Total assignments		807	767	591	587	2761¹
Total texts		840	787	602	620	2858¹
Total words		1,440,185	1,781,686	1,558,715	1,704,015	6,506,995¹

1. In Social Sciences 3 students and 9 texts are of unknown level

Table 2. The Classification of Genre Families

Genre Families	Educational purpose/ Generic structure/ Genre network	Genres (examples)
1. Case Study	<p>to demonstrate/develop an understanding of professional practice through the analysis of a single exemplar</p> <p>description of a particular case, often multifaceted, with recommendations or suggestions for future action</p> <p>typically corresponds to professional genres (e.g. in business, medicine, and engineering)</p>	<p>business start-up company report investigation report organisation analysis patient case notes patient report single issue tourism report</p>
2. Critique	<p>to demonstrate/develop understanding of the object of study and the ability to evaluate and / or assess the significance of the object of study</p> <p>includes descriptive account with optional explanation, and evaluation with optional tests</p> <p>may correspond to part of a research report, professional design specification or expert evaluation</p>	<p>academic paper review approach evaluation business / organisation evaluation financial report evaluation interpretation of results legislation evaluation policy evaluation product/ building evaluation project evaluation review of a book/ film/ play/ website system evaluation teaching evaluation</p>
3. Design Specification	<p>to demonstrate/develop the ability to design a product or procedure that could be manufactured or implemented</p> <p>typically includes purpose, component selection, and proposal; may include development and testing of design</p> <p>may correspond to a professional design specification, or to part of a proposal or research report.</p>	<p>application design building design database design game design label design product design system design website design</p>
4. Empathy writing	<p>to demonstrate/develop understanding and appreciation of the relevance of academic ideas by translating them into a non-academic register, to communicate to a non-specialist readership</p> <p>may be formatted as a letter, newspaper article or similar non-academic genre</p> <p>may correspond to professional writing</p>	<p>expert information for journalist expert advice to industry expert advice to lay person information leaflet job application letter (e.g. reflective letter to a friend; business correspondence) newspaper article</p>
5. Essay	<p>to demonstrate/develop the ability to construct a coherent argument and employ critical thinking skills</p> <p>introduction, series of arguments, conclusion; may be discussion (issue, pros/cons, final position); exposition (thesis, evidence, restate thesis); factorial (outcome, conditioning factors); consequential (input, consequences, restatement); challenge (opposition to existing theory); or commentary (series of comments on a text)</p> <p>may correspond to a published academic/specialist paper</p>	<p>challenge commentary consequential discussion exposition factorial</p>
6. Exercise	<p>to provide practice in key skills (e.g. the ability to interrogate a database, perform complex calculations, or</p>	<p>calculations data analysis</p>

	<p>explain technical terms or procedures), and to consolidate knowledge of key concepts</p> <p>data analysis or a series of responses to questions</p> <p>may correspond to part of a methodology recount or research report</p>	<p>mixed (e.g. calculations + essays)</p> <p>short answers</p> <p>stats exercise</p>
7. Explanation	<p>to demonstrate/ develop understanding of the object of study; and the ability to describe and/or account for its significance</p> <p>includes descriptive account, explanation</p> <p>may correspond to a published explanation, or to part of a research report or professional design specification</p>	<p>business explanation</p> <p>job description</p> <p>instrument description</p> <p>methodology explanation</p> <p>organism / disease account</p> <p>product development report</p> <p>site/ environment report</p> <p>species / breed description</p> <p>system/ process explanation</p> <p>account of natural phenomenon</p> <p>taxonomy report</p> <p>working farm report</p>
8. Literature Survey	<p>to demonstrate/develop familiarity with literature relevant to the focus of study</p> <p>includes summary of sources relevant to the focus of study and varying degrees of critical evaluation</p> <p>may correspond to a published paper or anthology, or to part of a research report</p>	<p>Analytical bibliography</p> <p>annotated bibliography</p> <p>anthology</p> <p>literature review</p> <p>literature overview</p> <p>research methods review</p> <p>review article</p>
9. Methodology Recount	<p>to demonstrate/develop familiarity with disciplinary procedures, methods, and conventions for recording experimental findings</p> <p>describes procedures undertaken by writer and may include Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections, or these functions may be realised iteratively</p> <p>may correspond to a section within a research report or research report</p>	<p>computer analysis report</p> <p>data analysis report</p> <p>experimental report</p> <p>field report</p> <p>forensic report</p> <p>lab report</p> <p>materials selection report</p> <p>program development report</p>
10 Narrative Recount	<p>to demonstrate/develop awareness of motives and/or behaviour in individuals (including self) or organisations</p> <p>fictional or factual recount of events, with optional comments</p> <p>may correspond to published literature, a professional proposal or a report, or to part of a research report</p>	<p>accident report</p> <p>biography</p> <p>character outline</p> <p>plot synopsis</p> <p>recount of literature search</p> <p>recount of website search</p> <p>reflective recount</p> <p>report on disease outbreak</p> <p>short story</p> <p>urban ethnography</p>
11. Problem Question	<p>to provide practice in applying specific methods in response to simulated professional problems</p> <p>problem (may not be stated in assignment), application of relevant arguments or presentation of possible solution(s) in response to scenario</p> <p>problems or situations may resemble or be based on real legal, engineering, accounting or other professional cases</p>	<p>law problem question</p> <p>logistics simulation</p> <p>medical problem</p>
12 Proposal	<p>to demonstrate/develop ability to make a case for future action</p> <p>includes purpose, detailed plan, persuasive argumentation</p>	<p>book proposal</p> <p>building proposal</p> <p>business plan</p> <p>catering plan</p>

	may correspond to professional or academic proposals	legislation reform marketing plan policy proposal research proposal
13. Research Report	to demonstrate/develop ability to undertake a complete piece of research including research design, and an appreciation of its significance in the field includes student's research aim/question, investigation, links to other research in the field may correspond to a published experimental research article or topic-based research paper	research article research project topic-based dissertation

For Peer Review

Table 3. Distribution of Genre Families by Disciplinary Group

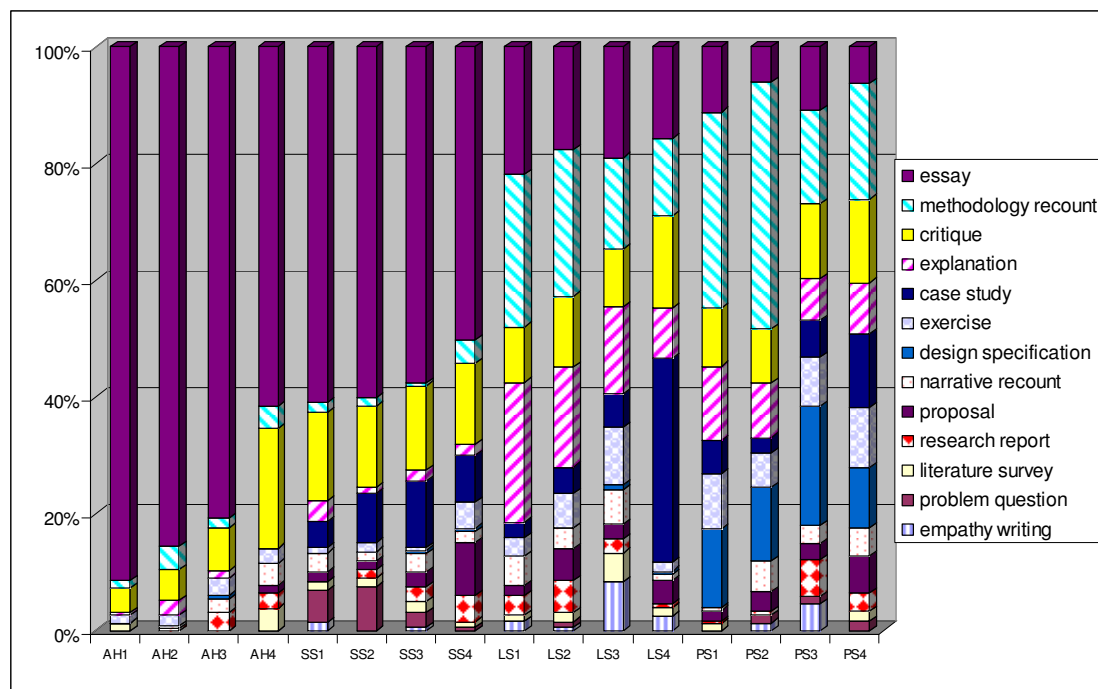
	Arts and Humanities	Life Sciences	Physical Sciences	Social Sciences	Total
Case Study	0	91	37	66	194
Critique	48	84	76	114	322
Design Specification	1	2	87	3	93
Empathy Writing	5	19	9	3	36
Essay	601	127	65	444	1237
Exercise	14	33	49	18	114
Explanation	9	117	65	23	214
Literature Survey	7	14	4	10	35
Methodology Recount	18	157	170	16	361
Narrative Recount	10	25	21	19	75
Problem Question	0	2	6	32	40
Proposal	2	26	19	29	76
Research Report	9	22	16	14	61
Total	724	719	624	791	2858

Table 4. Distribution of Genre Families by Level

	1	2	3	4	Total
Case Study	26	30	35	103	194
Critique	78	79	67	96	322 ¹
Design Specification	24	19	35	15	93
Empathy Writing	10	3	18	5	36
Essay	416	360	264	191	1237 ¹
Exercise	28	28	31	27	114
Explanation	81	62	34	37	214
Literature Survey	10	6	9	10	35
Methodology Recount	120	127	49	65	361
Narrative Recount	18	19	21	17	75
Problem Question	12	19	6	3	40
Proposal	10	19	11	35	76 ¹
Research Report	7	16	22	16	61
Total	840	787	602	620	2858 ¹

1. 9 texts are of unknown level (2 Critiques, 6 Essays and 1Proposal)

Figure 1 Genre family distribution by discipline and level



AH1 = Arts & Humanities Level 1; AH2 = Arts & Humanities Level 2, etc.