

Exploring Disciplinary Discourse

Or

How Do People In My Major Write?

This module is called “Exploring Disciplinary Discourse.” An academic “discipline” is a field of study such as “biology,” “history,” or “mathematics.” A discipline is a large group of people who study the same kinds of things using methods and evidence that they all mostly agree on. Every discipline has its own vocabulary, preferred style, and standard forms of writing (genres) that all add up to what might be called the “discourse” of that discipline. You are probably used to calling a discipline a “major” because when you attend a college or university, you have to declare a major field or emphasis.

The activities in this module are about discovering the types of writing that people who work in your chosen field do everyday. You will find out what genres they write, what kind of style they prefer, and what words they use that might not be common in other fields. Then you will make connections between what you learned in your English course and the discourse of your major. What things are different? What things are the same?

The final paper in this module is something that is often called an “I-Search” paper. In this paper you will describe what you investigated, how you went about your investigation, and what you found. Your audience for this paper will be other students who may be considering majoring in this field.

Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to:

- Use different search terms to discover the genres and styles of their major field
- Make decisions as they design and conduct their own inquiries
- Describe their experience of the research process and their findings from beginning to end in a paper addressed to other students who may be considering the same major
- Make connections between concepts and strategies taught in their composition class and writing in their majors

A Mini-Proposal

To get started, you will write a mini-proposal for your project. Answer the following questions in a separate document and submit them to your instructor. Your instructor will give you suggestions and approve your project.

- **What is your intended major?** (If you have not yet chosen a major, explore one that you are considering.)
- **What do you already know (or think you know) about writing in this field?** (Note: Some students choose a major such as engineering because they think there will not be much writing. However, engineers write a lot and the ones who write well are the ones most likely to get promoted.)
- **What do you want to find out about the work people do in this field?**
- **What search terms will you use in your initial investigation?** (A starting point might be “writing in MY MAJOR” or “How to write like an engineer, scientist, CEO, etc.”)

A Progress Report

You will start by using a search engine to find materials on the internet. You may find that your first search terms give you too many or too few results, or the wrong sorts of sites. You are looking for advice about writing in your field and for sample documents that represent the different kinds of things that people in this discipline write. As you find useful sites, bookmark them so that you can return to them later for more analysis. Some sites may have links to other related sites that are even more useful than the first site. As you continue, you should begin seeing similar advice and documents on various sites. At this point you are beginning to get a feeling for the discourse of the community.

Answer the questions below and submit the document to your instructor as a progress report.

- **What went right and what went wrong in your initial searches? What strategies did you use to get usable results?**
- **What kinds of writing (genres) do people in this field generally do?** (Note: The essay is a genre. So are reports, emails, letters, proposals, etc.)
- **What advice did you find that was repeated on more than one site?**
- **What kind of style seems to be appropriate in this field? Do they prefer simple sentences, concision, and maximum clarity, or do they like elegant writing with complex sentences and big words?**
- **What unfamiliar words did you encounter that seem to be important in this discipline?**

An Academic Extension

(Note: This activity is optional, but your instructor may require it, especially in a college-level course.)

Much of what you have found on the internet about your discipline is likely to be about workplace writing or the everyday discourse of people working in their careers. However, most fields also have a

strong academic component. To find out about the academic discourse of a discipline, you have to look at articles in the journals that are specific to that field. These are the places where professors publish new research that they have done. In the past, these journals were distributed to libraries as printed copies. Today, even print journals can be accessed electronically through library databases. Other journals are entirely digital, with no printed copies.

The way to find journal articles is to use academic databases you will find on the library's website. Most university libraries have online guides for various disciplines that will tell you which databases to search for your particular discipline. You can also usually chat with a research librarian who specializes in your field. For this part of the module, it is best to have a specific topic you want to search for. As you were doing your previous searches, a particular aspect of the field may have caught your attention, perhaps a particular job, a question, or an area of research. Choose some search terms that will help you find out more about this topic.

Now choose an appropriate database and type your search terms into the search box. You will probably get lots of hits, perhaps hundreds. Scroll through the results looking for a title that seems interesting. Click on a title and you will probably see an abstract, which is a short bit of text, usually a paragraph or two, that briefly describes the research question, the methods, the results, and the conclusions. If the abstract sounds interesting or useful, open the article itself and answer the following questions.

- **How would you cite this article in a “Works Cited” or “References” page?** (It would be best to use the citation style of the discipline you are investigating, but if you don't know what style they use, put this in MLA or APA style.)
- **What can you tell about the article from the introduction? Is the introduction similar to the abstract?**
- **What can you tell about the preferred academic style of the discipline from the first page? Are sentences short and simple or complex? Is there a lot of jargon (words that only people familiar with the discipline understand). Do they use first person?**
- **How is the article organized? Does it have sections with headings?** (You will have to page through the article to see this.)
- **How difficult is the article for you to read? If it is difficult, what causes the difficulty?** (Note: Journal articles are written by professionals in the field for other professionals who are very familiar with the field. It is normal for newcomers to the field to struggle to read journal articles, but the only way to get better at it is to keep reading them.)
- **What did you learn from this brief look at this article?**

Writing the Paper

First, look back at your mini-proposal to see what you knew about this field before you started your investigation. Do you know more now? Were any of your previous expectations wrong? Your audience for this paper is someone like you were before you did the investigation. Perhaps they are thinking

about this field, but they are not sure. Your job is to inform them. You might even want to persuade them to think about choosing this career path.

Writing this paper is pretty simple. Here are the steps:

1. First, talk about why you wanted to investigate this field. Describe what you knew and what you wanted to find out. This material comes from your mini-proposal. Clearly, it is appropriate to write this in first person.
2. Next, describe your search. What search terms did you use and how did they work out? What difficulties did you have and how did you solve them?
3. Next, describe your results. What did you find out? What advice did writers give? What kind of style is appropriate? What kinds of documents do people produce and how are they used?
4. If you did the academic extension part of this module, what article did you analyze? What did you learn from it?
5. Now describe your conclusions. What did you learn? What advice would you give others considering this field? What connections did you find between the concepts and strategies you learned in your English course and the writing in the discipline of your choice?
6. Now create your “Works Cited” or “References” page. Make sure to include all of the articles and web pages that you referred to in your paper.

Peer Review

Before you turn in the final draft to your instructor, trade papers with a partner who investigated a different discipline. Discuss the following questions for each other’s papers:

- **Does the paper give the reader a good idea of what it is like to work and write in the discipline of choice? Why or why not?**
- **Are there any surprising or interesting details? What are they?**
- **Are there any gaps or missing elements that cause the reader to have questions? What could the writer do to address these?**
- **If the audience is other students who might be considering this major, does the paper serve that audience well? Why or why not? If not, how could it be improved?**

After this discussion, make any revisions you think are needed and turn the paper in to your instructor.

