**Choosing and Using Sample Texts**

Scientific ideas can be expressed in many different written formats, ranging from academic journal articles, to lab reports and essays, to news stories in magazines and newspapers. One of the best strategies for helping students understand and master how to write effectively in all these different formats is using sample texts as illustrative examples. As examples, sample texts can serve not only to demonstrate specific writing rules and conventions, but also to familiarize students with what good and bad writing looks like. Careful and strategic selection of sample texts can benefit both learners and educators.

**Using Sample Texts to Teach Genre-Specific Writing**

It can be particularly helpful to use sample texts when instructing students on how to write in a specific genre.

**Genre** is a term for grouping texts together. It represents the typical way that writers use language to respond to recurring situations1, 2. Both a social and cognitive concept, genre is defined by the rules and expectations for communication that its writers and readers adhere to. With this definition in mind, different types of science writing can be viewed as being parts of different genres. For example, a journal article reporting on original research would be part of one genre, while a lab report would be part of another. As a result, principles for teaching genre writing can be applied to teaching science writing.

**Ecocomposition theory**3 is also useful, as it considers how student writers learn about discipline-specific writing by likening the process to operating in an ecosystem composed of textual forms, cultural norms, interpersonal interactions, purposes, and ideas. Science writers effectively enter their own ecosystem and begin to acknowledge the different interrelationships that exist. Texts -- and prompts from instructors and tutors -- that locate students contextually within the ecosystem are the best for developing the desired skills (e.g. texts that make students wonder what a researcher is trying to convey in a journal article, and why he/she is communicating in such a way, would help them to engage with their discipline more fully).

Current thinking suggests that writing tutors and instructors should focus on teaching genre more clearly instead of differentiating between teaching generalist and specialist writing skills4. Because all students should learn for themselves what it means to play a role in discipline-specific discourse, genre theory should also prove useful from a generalist and specialist perspective because it provides a tool to help with that discourse5.

**Strategies**

The following strategies may prove helpful when using sample texts to help students work confidently and appropriately within a genre.

**Strategy 1: Start by familiarizing students with the chosen genre**

* Before teaching students to effectively write within a given genre, it’s helpful to start with a solid understanding of the genre itself -- how it views the world and what it values as a result of that unique perspective.
* Aim to familiarize students with the conventions and expectations of a genre, as well as more technical details such as the typical formats of communication, types of documents, citation styles, organization, and language.
* Discuss students’ past experiences (if any) of writing in the chosen genre.
* Provide a number of sample texts that are representative of writing from that genre.

**Strategy 2: Compare and contrast writing in different genres**

* Discuss how writing in different genres differs in characteristics such as format, purpose, style, and audience. Use samples taken from different genres to illustrate these differences.
* Discuss how writing in one genre can share similarities to writing in another genre. Also point out overarching features common to good science writing. Use supporting sample texts.
* It may also be helpful to show the contrast in writing conventions that exists between sub-specialties of the same genre.

**Strategy 3: Empower students to write confidently within a genre**

* Teaching how to write in different genres is also an opportunity to empower students to increase their sense of ownership over their writing. Often when students learn to adjust their writing to fit into a genre-specific style, they can feel like they have lost their individuality, or their voice is suppressed by the genre’s rules for writing.
* To alleviate concerns about the rigidity of genre, encourage students to see writing in a genre as being akin to stepping into a new environment. Rather than seeing their writing as being isolated within a genre, help them to see it as part of an interactive web of other writing. Using sample texts can help reveal this related web by showing students how their work fits in with past work and work from other writers.

Another suggestion is to choose sample texts that intentionally deviate from the expectations of a genre, and discuss how this can be used for creative effect.

**Practical Considerations when Choosing Sample Texts**

* Ensure students have sufficient background to comprehend the material discussed in the samples.
* Do not assume all students will recognize cultural, historical, or scientific references familiar to you.
* Include multiple perspectives on a topic rather than focusing solely on a single perspective.
* Examine course content regularly for samples that contain out-dated information. Appropriately credit the source of the sample text.

**References**

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5. Walker K. The debate over generalist tutors: genre theory’s contribution. The Writ Cent J. 1998; 18(2):27-32.