

Analysis

Writing instructors help students...

Analyze how writers reflect, challenge, and transform their discourse communities, including in their relationship to formal and stylistic conventions.

Discourse community: a group of people who are interested in a topic and sharing a conversation on that topic, even if they do not agree on every aspect of that topic. Examples of discourse communities include classmates, work colleagues, music or sports fans, community groups, families, or any group of people interested in a shared topic/subject. Discourse communities rely on respectful dialogue, understanding multiple perspectives, and establishing shared values or community rules for navigating disagreements.

Formal and stylistic conventions: Effective writers are aware of the way they can and must alter word choices, sentence structures, and tone in order to reach different audiences such as classmates, instructors, bosses, friends, family, fellow fans, etc. Writers are products of historical and personal circumstances who reflect those around them and those they are trying to inform, persuade, or entertain. Discourse communities can develop formally or informally as groups of writers read and communicate about a shared topic or subject. By studying how writers attempt to reach different audiences and how they use their words to challenge and transform conventional wisdom and use certain formal and stylistic conventions for different contexts, writing students can achieve a better sense of how they can do the same thing in their own academic, personal, creative, and professional writing.

Why is this objective important? For students, for the program?

Learning to understand that not all writing in college is the same and that there are different ways of approaching different classes, assignments, or activities can provide students with metacognitive skills that help them make more informed and reflective decisions as they write and to improve their performance on their writing assignments in their classes. Such learning can also inspire students to feel more confident in their personal writing and creative writing and help them see writing as less of a chore and more of a tool and gift. Student also can learn to appreciate grammar and other conventions as tools rather than rules.

Example Learning Activities:

Early in the term, after defining “discourse community” for students, ask students to quietly brainstorm discourse communities that they are a currently a part of – whether by choice or circumstance. Then, ask students to select at least two different discourse communities and write out a brief explanation of how their different discourse communities expect members to engage in and resolve disagreements. Then discuss as a class:

- What types of issues define the types of discourse communities that students choose to be a part of? What about the communities that students have little or no choice over their inclusion (like with a roommate or their families)?
- What are the differences in expectations for how members in distinct discourse communities will engage in and potentially resolve disagreements? Which expectations do students find it easier to adhere to? Harder to adhere to?
- What types of expectations does the discourse community of the classroom want to agree to? Brainstorm, discuss and debate, and write down the final list and publish it on the course Canvas page. It's ideal to get broad agreement, but as the instructor, it's OK to reserve final authority to set the final list of discourse community expectations for respect, discussion, and disagreement.
- Ask students to think about and discuss how this understanding of discourse community might influence their understanding of audience while writing for the class. What choices might they make in their writing that reflect, challenge, or transform the discourse community of the class?