Writing in Academic Communities

How does writing function in college life? How and why does writing vary across academic disciplines? This chapter introduces the idea of the "discourse community," emphasizes the social and contextual nature of writing, and applies these two concepts to discovering how writing functions in academic majors and disciplines. The writing assignment—an empirical report—invites you to examine language practices in your chosen field of study. Completing this assignment also lays the foundation for writing a similar report in Chapter 7.

Communication is integral to community. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, how particular communities use language is one of the ways that they define and distinguish themselves. Speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing are vital not only to neighborhoods and nations but also to professions and academic disciplines. This chapter focuses on communication practices—and particularly writing practices—that occur within academic communities. The readings and exercises will guide you as you investigate a particular discipline's communication habits. That, in turn, should prove useful as you move forward in your major field of study.

Scholars have developed terms such as discourse community, community of practice, and activity system to help describe the ways writing works in a particular discipline or profession and to help discern the ways language practices vary across settings, contexts, and disciplines. This chapter describes what a discourse community is and explains its consequences as you learn to write across contexts. It then asks you to apply the principle of the discourse community to academic life, and particularly to the writing you are likely to do in a college major.

The suggested genre for the writing assignment in this chapter is the empirical research report, a format common to the sciences and social sciences. This chapter introduces the conventions of the genre and features one academic article that uses it.
**What Is a Discourse Community?**

Most professions demand effective communicators and specialized modes of communication. This is evident when you switch on a TV show such as *ER*. When a patient is wheeled in, the machines beeping and buzzing, the doctors and nurses automatically launch into medical work and talk. Everyone seems to know his or her role; no one slows down to instruct or explain. They toss around terms such as *epi*, *foley*, and *lavage*; they order a “CBC” or a “chem 7.” We know it’s an emergency; we know they’re working to assess and treat the patient; we get the gist of what they’re doing. But still, we are outsiders. We don’t have a grasp on the medical knowledge; we haven’t been schooled in that language. What is immediately clear to the doctors and nurses is opaque to us. We’re just not part of that professional culture. This doesn’t mean that medical professionals and ordinary folks can’t communicate in everyday situations. But most of us—unless trained and mentored for years—cannot participate fully in
the specialized activity system of doctors and nurses, the discourse community of medicine.

Discourse refers to communication practices. It is a more expansive term than writing or even language in that it covers many media (e.g., writing, speaking, digital text, gestures, cultural codes, visual images), includes both everyday and special language events, and refers not only to static texts but also to language in action. A discourse community is a group of people who are unified by similar patterns of language use, shared assumptions, common knowledge, and parallel habits of interpretation. This is also sometimes referred to as a “community of practice.” Some discourse communities are rather small (a handful of nuclear physicists spread around the world who exchange research in a highly specialized academic journal), some larger (an ethnic neighborhood in which members share a history, language, public space, local institutions such as schools, and a local newspaper), and some larger still (a nation, such as the United States, unified by a shared history, mass media, a government, a sense of national identity). As Chapter 3 demonstrates, communities are complex organisms. Patterns of sameness unify and distinguish a community; likewise, differences and tensions emerge. Not all members of a discourse community communicate exactly the same way, of course, but they do generally share several discernable linguistic characteristics.

Most of us belong to several overlapping discourse communities. However, this chapter examines only academic disciplines—biology or English or electrical engineering, for example—as distinct discourse communities, as distinct activity systems, each with different motives, conventions, habits, and ways of communicating. Because this book concentrates on writing, this chapter gives only passing attention to speaking, viewing, and nonverbal communication; it instead centers on how writers and written texts function within academic communities.

A common belief is that once one learns the rules for writing, one can write pretty much anything. There is also a perception that "good writing" reflects a fairly fixed set of skills and standards that apply consistently across most circumstances. Yet even an "A" in first-year composition doesn't carry any guarantee that one will be a successful writer in a chosen discipline. And in fact, perfect sentence-level skills—while certainly good to have—would be but little consolation if today you were asked to write a legal brief, an engineering proposal, or a master's thesis in history. Such acts of writing require knowing what kinds of evidence matter in a chosen field and which don't. They demand knowing which values and habits prevail as well as understanding what makes people in a particular community nod yes in affirmation or wince in disapproval.

Much of the research on writing confirms this view: Writing is about much more than mastering grammar and usage (although these are indeed important). Successful writing also demands a working familiarity with the values,
habits, conventions, and tacit knowledge that prevail in a particular discourse community. Learning to write means entering a discourse community or an activity system—becoming a member, or at least an apprentice. Once one earns membership, writing becomes a tool for action within the community.

Entering a new discourse community can be like learning a foreign language. Keeping this analogy in mind can be helpful; but you should also understand that coming to participate in a discourse a community involves more than acquiring a technical vocabulary. One also needs to learn the culture that forms the context for that vocabulary.

In the reading selection below, Nancy Sakamoto employs a game metaphor. Like the foreign language analogy, this one is also useful, as it suggests that entering a discourse community means getting to know the rules of a new game (both the explicit and implicit ones) and practicing (often for years) before really getting the swing of things.

**Essay: Nancy Sakamoto, Conversational Ballgames**

*Nancy Sakamoto was born in the United States, graduated from UCLA, and lived in Japan for 24 years. She is the author of Polite Fictions: Why Japanese and Americans Seem Rude to Each Other.*

After I was married and had lived in Japan for a while, my Japanese gradually improved to the point where I could take part in simple conversations with my husband and his friends and family. And I began to notice that often, when I joined in, the others would look startled, and the conversational topic would come to a halt. After this happened several times, it became clear to me that I was doing something wrong. But for a long time, I didn’t know what it was.

Finally, after listening carefully to many Japanese conversations, I discovered what my problem was. Even though I was speaking Japanese, I was handling the conversation in a western way.

Japanese-style conversations develop quite differently from western-style conversations. And the difference isn’t only in the languages. I realized that just as I kept trying to hold western-style conversations even when I was speaking Japanese, so my English students kept trying to hold Japanese-style conversations even when they were speaking English. We were unconsciously playing entirely different conversational ballgames.

A western-style conversation between two people is like a game of tennis. If I introduce a topic, a conversational ball, I expect you to hit it back. If you agree with me, I don’t expect you simply to agree, and do nothing more. I expect you to add something—a reason for agreeing, another example, or an elaboration to carry the idea further. But I don’t expect you always to agree. I am just as happy
if you question me or challenge me, or completely disagree with me. Whether you agree or disagree, your response will return the ball to me.

And then it is my turn again. I don’t serve a new ball from my original starting line. I hit your ball back again from where it has bounced. I carry your idea further, or answer your questions or objections, or challenge or question you. And so the ball goes back and forth, with each of us doing our best to give it a new twist, an original spin, or a powerful smash.

And the more vigorous the action, the more interesting and exciting the game. Of course, if one of us gets angry, it spoils the conversation, just as it spoils a tennis game. But getting excited is not at all the same as getting angry. After all, we are not trying to hit each other. We are trying to hit the ball. So long as we attack only each other’s opinions, and do not attack each other personally, we don’t expect anyone to get hurt. A good conversation is supposed to be interesting and exciting.

If there are more than two people in the conversation, then it is like doubles in tennis, or like volleyball. There’s no waiting in line. Whoever is nearest and quickest hits the ball, and if you step back, someone else will hit it. No one stops the game to give you a turn. You’re responsible for taking your own turn.

But whether it’s two players or a group, everyone does his best to keep the ball going, and no one person has the ball for very long.

A Japanese-style conversation, however, is not at all like tennis or volleyball. It’s like bowling. You wait for your turn. And you always know your place in line. It depends on such things as whether you are older or younger, a close friend or a relative stranger to the previous speaker, in a senior or junior position, and so on.

When your turn comes, you step up to the starting line with your bowling ball, and carefully bowl it. Everyone else stands back and watches politely, murmuring encouragement. Everyone waits until the ball has reached the end of the alley, and watches to see if it knocks down all the pins, or only some of them, or none of them. There is a pause, while everyone registers your score.

Then, after everyone is sure that you have completely finished your turn, the next person in line steps up to the same starting line, with a different ball. He doesn’t return your ball, and he does not begin from where your ball stopped. There is no back and forth at all. All the balls run parallel. And there is always a suitable pause between turns. There is no rush, no excitement, no scramble for the ball.

No wonder everyone looked startled when I took part in Japanese conversations. I paid no attention to whose turn it was, and kept snatching the ball halfway down the alley and throwing it back at the bowler. Of course the conversation died. I was playing the wrong game.

This explains why it is almost impossible to get a western-style conversation or discussion going with English students in Japan. I used to think that the problem was their lack of English language ability. But I finally came to realize that the biggest problem is that they, too, are playing the wrong game.
Whenever I serve a volleyball, everyone just stands back and watches it fall, with occasional murmurs of encouragement. No one hits it back. Everyone waits until I call on someone to take a turn. And when that person speaks, he doesn’t hit my ball back. He serves a new ball. Again, everyone just watches it fall.

So I call on someone else. This person does not refer to what the previous speaker has said. He also serves a new ball. Nobody seems to have paid any attention to what anyone else has said. Everyone begins again from the same starting line, and all the balls run parallel. There is never any back and forth. Everyone is trying to bowl with a volleyball.

And if I try a simpler conversation, with only two of us, then the other person tries to bowl with my tennis ball. No wonder foreign English teachers in Japan get discouraged.

Now that you know about the difference in the conversational ballgames, you may think that all your troubles are over. But if you have been trained all your life to play one game, it is no simple matter to switch to another, even if you know the rules. Knowing the rules is not at all the same thing as playing the game.

Even now, during a conversation in Japanese I will notice a startled reaction, and belatedly realize that once again I have rudely interrupted by instinctively trying to hit back the other person’s bowling ball. It is no easier for me to “just listen” during a conversation, than it is for my Japanese students to “just relax” when speaking with foreigners. Now I can truly sympathize with how hard they must find it to try to carry on a western-style conversation.

If I have not yet learned to do conversational bowling in Japanese, at least I have figured out one thing that puzzled me for a long time. After his first trip to America, my husband complained that Americans asked him so many questions and made him talk so much at the dinner table that he never had a chance to eat. When I asked him why he couldn’t talk and eat at the same time, he said that Japanese do not customarily think that dinner, especially on fairly formal occasions, is a suitable time for extended conversation.

Since Westerners think that conversation is an indispensable part of dining, and indeed would consider it impolite not to converse with one’s dinner partner, I found this Japanese custom rather strange. Still, I could accept it as a cultural difference even though I didn’t really understand it. But when my husband added, in explanation, that Japanese consider it extremely rude to talk with one’s mouth full, I got confused. Talking with one’s mouth full is certainly not an American custom. We think it very rude, too. Yet we still manage to talk a lot and eat at the same time. How do we do it?

For a long time, I couldn’t explain it, and it bothered me. But after I discovered the conversational ballgames, I finally found the answer. Of course! In a western style conversation, you hit the ball, and while someone else is hitting it back you take a bite, chew, and swallow. Then you hit the ball again, and then eat some more. The more people there are in the conversation, the more
chances you have to eat. But even with only two of you talking you still have plenty of chances to eat.

Maybe that’s why polite conversation at the dinner table has never been a traditional part of Japanese etiquette. Your turn to talk would last so long without interruption that you’d never get a chance to eat.

Responding to Reading

1. Have you ever been in a situation like the one Sakamoto describes, in which you did not know the unwritten rules of a culture or group? (This does not have to involve travel abroad—it can also apply to other situations.)

2. Why didn’t Sakamoto immediately realize her mistaken habits of communication?

3. What role does Sakamoto’s husband play in her cultural education? What role does personal experience play? What other factors help her arrive at realizations about communication?

4. Sakamoto uses personal narrative and the extended metaphors of tennis, bowling, and volleyball to frame her essay. How effective are these rhetorical strategies? What other approaches could the author have taken?

Discourse Communities, Disciplines, and “Good” Writing

Sakamoto’s experience illustrates that learning the surface vocabulary of a language does not ensure that one will be able to communicate effectively. Just as with conversation, successful writing is usually about more than learning explicit rules. Rather, it demands becoming an apprentice to a particular culture. Note that “culture” can refer not just to national cultures (such as that of the Japanese) but also to academic culture (such as that of biologists) or professional cultures (such as that of lawyers) or any number of subcultures (such as that of Green Bay Packers fans).

Learning to write is a social process. Entering a new community of practice can be a slow and difficult process, and novices cannot simply dive in and expect to swim as experts. In fact, expertise usually cannot be achieved only by study; it generally takes a good deal of experience or apprenticeship on the job, acting within the discourse community itself (which is why, for example, doctors not only attend medical school but also undergo years as interns and residents).

Still, one meaningful thing that a newcomer to a community can do is increase his or her awareness of how language functions in a discourse commu-
nity. As a student, you can learn some of the unstated rules of disciplinary communities and thus avoid misunderstanding later. The assignment for this chapter provides a framework for researching a particular discourse community: that of your prospective major in college. This will put you one step ahead of the game as you progress in that major.

As you and your classmates undertake this assignment, you will come to realize that there is no universal standard for “good” writing in the university. Rather, each discipline constitutes a community of practice or an activity system that uses writing in its own way and for its own motives. Writing as a physicist, for example, is quite different from writing as a literary critic, which in turn is quite different from writing as a nurse, and so on. Although some basic skills such as standard grammar hold relatively consistent across the university, each discipline has its own traditions, conventions, and standards to which the members of that community conform (or, perhaps, against which they rebel). Successful college writers recognize the differences among the discourse communities and act in light of that awareness.

**WRITING TO DISCOVER**

Sketch three columns on a page and at the top of each write the title of a recent academic course in which you had to do a significant amount of writing, whether in the form of essays, papers, exams, journals, or other projects. Below each course title, first write the actual texts that you can remember writing while in that course. Then write the rules for successful writing in that class. These should include explicit rules—such as course or grading policies—and unwritten rules—such as the assumed norms for writing in that course or perceptions about what the teacher wanted. Note where the expectations for the writing in the three classes overlap and where they differ.

**Research Article: Lucille McCarthy, Stranger in Strange Lands: One Student Writing Across the Curriculum**

*Lucille McCarthy is a researcher and professor who has published many studies on learning and writing in college. She wrote the following article, which was published in a scholarly journal, for researchers in the field of composition studies. You might find it difficult, and the specialized terminology and citations of previous scholarship will be unfamiliar. That’s okay. Stick with it.*

Because this reading selection is difficult, try a systematic note-taking method to help get a handle on it. For each cluster of two to four paragraphs, make marginal notes on the most significant content for that section, the rhetorical