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Beyond the Word Count: Using Assignment Sheets to Promote Genre Awareness

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Abstract

Despite the best efforts of their instructors, first-year students often misinterpret or even ignore assignment sheets, leading to unmet learning outcomes and demoralising marks. Like academic writing as a whole, assignment sheets often contain conventions, terminology, and expectations that are unfamiliar to incoming undergraduates. In this paper, I propose an activity which calls students' attention to assignment sheets as a genre, helping them meet the practical requirements of their assignments as well as develop their genre awareness. Students work in groups to rank the major goals of their current assignment as specified in the assignment sheet and use previous student responses to consider the diverse ways in which these goals can be fulfilled. This exercise in critical reading shows students the close generic and rhetorical connection between the assignment sheet and the written responses it generates, as well as the variety of successful uptakes that are possible within the assigned genre.

Introduction

Whether in the context of a course or a writing centre consultation, first-year undergraduates often struggle to interpret assignment sheets, sometimes neglecting to consult them altogether. Instructors work to prevent this confusion by making their assignment sheets, also commonly known as writing or assignment prompts, as clear and concise as possible. The most effective instructors draw on assignment design research and spend significant amounts of class time explaining their assignment sheets and clarifying requirements as the due date approaches. Despite these precautions, instructors often find themselves obligated to penalize some students for misinterpreting or failing to grasp the major goals of the assignment.

Analysis of assignment sheets as a genre can help us understand these challenges in student uptake. A number of genre scholars have studied the assignment sheet through this lens, especially as it forms part of the larger activity system of classroom genres along with syllabi, assigned textbooks or readings, lectures, notes, and coursework (Bawarshi, 2003; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bazerman, 2004; Clark, 2005; Formo & Neary, 2020; Jankens, 2019; Johns, 2002, 2008). Perhaps because it is so commonplace, Bawarshi (2003) notes that "the writing prompt [is] treated as essentially a transparent text… As a genre, it is mainly treated as one more prewriting heuristic, helping or 'prompting' student writers to discover something to write about" (p. 127). Despite this perception, many incoming undergraduates, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, have little prior experience with academic writing as a whole. University classroom genres, conventions, terminology, and expectations that may seem straightforward to instructors can be mysterious to inexperienced undergraduates. As Clark (2005) observes, "although students have encountered a number of writing assignments in high school, the college writing assignment contains unstated assumptions unfamiliar to students" (n.p.; see also Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Instructors making such assumptions will fall prey to what Clark calls the "assign and complain" (n.p.) phenomenon, repeatedly asking for critical analysis from students who are relatively new to the practice and who do not understand this requirement as presented in the assignment. Consequently, research on assignment sheets has mainly focused on helping instructors improve assignment design, or, to a lesser extent, measuring and supporting student uptake (Formo & Neary, 2020). The practical implications of this work are obvious: understanding assignment sheets promotes critical reading practices and genre awareness that will serve students well throughout their undergraduate career and in whatever academic or professional discipline they pursue (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Clark, 2005; Jankens, 2019; Johns, 2002; Tardy, 2017).

While studying the genre of assignment sheets can help us make this "transparent text" (Clark, 2005, n.p.) more immediately usable for both teachers and students, it can also reveal the educational possibilities of the assignment sheets themselves. As Formo and Neary (2020) have observed, "the potential of assignment sheets as rhetorical tools to promote learning has, to a degree, been overlooked within the scholarship" (p. 336). Their own study investigates using assignment sheets to teach and reinforce threshold concepts in a first-year composition (FYC) context (Formo & Neary, 2020). Bawarshi (2003) has recognized the assignment sheet as a "site of invention," noting the closely connected genre set formed by the assignment sheet and the resultant text: "Invention takes place between and within these genred spaces, as one genre creates the timing and opportunity for

another" (p. 115). He argues that student writing is not simply the discrete result of the assignment sheet, but that "it is *within* the writing prompt that student writing begins, not after the prompt… As such, we cannot simply locate the beginning of student writing in student writers and their texts" (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 127). Bazerman also outlines the reciprocal nature of assignment design: conscientious instructors take student responses into account when iterating the assignment in question and how it is presented in the next version of the assignment sheet (Bazerman, 2004; see also Freadman, 2002).

In this paper, I present an activity designed to take advantage of the prevalence and utility of university assignment sheets, as well as the interconnectedness between the assignment sheet and the student writing it helps to generate. By explicitly calling students' attention to assignment sheets as a genre, the instructor will familiarize them with another example of the concept, one that is fundamental to the university classroom. Moreover, the exercise will support students' developing genre awareness by reminding them that there are many ways to successfully respond to an assignment prompt and meet the learning outcomes specified there. Students will learn to approach their assignment sheets, as well as any models of student response that they are provided, with a regular practice of critical and rhetorical reading, revealing the systemic, intertextual, and fluid nature of genres.

The Activity in Context(s)

This exercise was first designed as a group activity to reinforce the learning outcome and assignment parameters of a genre analysis assignment in a FYC seminar. The students were already introduced to the concepts of genre, discourse communities, and rhetoric, laying the groundwork for the rhetorical analysis and genre awareness needed for the assignment. Students were also shown how to access peer-reviewed sources and use them to support their analysis. While the activity was developed for this specific curricular context, with some adjustment it could be used for writing-intensive assignments in other disciplines or year-levels. In these cases, the instructor could simply be looking to reinforce the importance of the assignment sheet, or they wish to enrich or complicate their students' understanding of genres typically used in their field. If sufficient preparation time is available, it could also be modified for use by writing tutors to help a student that has self-identified as struggling to interpret assignment requirements.

As explained below, an instructor or tutor facilitating the activity must be able to access and share student responses to previous iterations of the assignment which have been obtained with student

permission or published. These responses may be written, oral, or multimodal, but they should all be examples of successful student uptake of the assignment sheet. Ideally, the instructor will have already introduced the class to the assignment in question via review of the assignment sheet and answered any initial questions the students may have raised. As Jankens (2019) has noted, students' questions about new assignments tend to focus on practical issues, such as topic, formatting and citation issues, or word count. To encourage deeper reflection on possible approaches or wider implications, the activity can be introduced later in the same class period or in a subsequent class.

Here I will review the framing and structure of the activity as I use it to reinforce the learning outcome and requirements of the assignment. First, I remind students of the learning outcome as laid out in the assignment sheet: "The purpose of this assignment is to demonstrate that you understand how a specific kind of writing works (e.g., who reads and writes it, why it is persuasive or effective, why it takes the form that it does, and why certain conventions are employed)." Second, I remind students that the genre analysis assignment requires them to collect three samples of their chosen genre to analyze. I then observe that the assignment sheet itself is a sample of a genre and review the definition of genre that they have been given from Wardle and Downs' (2023) *Writing about Writing*: genres are "recognizable forms of writing that respond to repeating situations" (p. 34).

To determine the "repeating situation" addressed by all assignment sheets, I ask the class what features their genre analysis assignment sheet shares with assignment sheets they have received in other courses. We eventually conclude that, whatever their discipline, instructors write assignment sheets to set out the learning outcomes and requirements of a particular assignment. I then ask them to focus on the differences between the assignment sheet samples, demonstrating how each instructor crafts their particular assignment to respond to the rhetorical situation specific to the course. This comparison shows students how genres can be both stable and dynamic, providing a conventional response to a shared rhetorical situation while also allowing room for the individual user to customize the format to their more specific needs (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). By incorporating ChatGPT-4 into the activity, instructors have another way to show this concept. For example, a student might compare my genre analysis assignment sheet to one assigning a literary analysis, a case report, or a scientific proposal. Students can use the app to generate assignment sheets for each of these genres, noting how they differ from assignment sheets that respond to the "real life" rhetorical situations of their specific university courses.

Next, I divide students into groups of three to four; while the activity could be done by students individually, this deprives them of the reinforcement of active problem-solving in a group and can

also create far more work for the instructor at a later stage of the activity. The groups are asked to rank the five most important assignment goals in the assignment sheet [see Appendix for the group activity slide]. Groups then share their rankings with the instructor via email. This portion of the activity helps students determine which of the many requirements listed on the assignment sheet merit the most attention, that is, which of the requirements bring the writer closer to meeting the assignment's learning outcome. This critical reading practice can be applied to interpreting future assignments. At this stage, I also include a self-disclosure noting how frustrating I find it as an instructor to penalize students who fail to recognize the major assignment goals.

As mentioned above, the second part of the group activity requires access to previous student responses to the assignment. I am fortunate in this regard because my institution hosts an open access journal of first-year writing that publishes previous student responses to the same genre analysis assignment used in my course. This resource allows me to provide students with genre analyses reflecting a variety of disciplines and interests without concerns about ethical collection for educational purposes (Hardy et al., 2015). Those who do not have access to such a resource could use a small collection of previous assignments if the authors have granted permission for their use in teaching. In either case, each group is assigned a digital version of a genre analysis and instructed to find examples in the text of how the author fulfilled the top five assignment requirements that they identified. They should then use commenting functions to label those rhetorical moves and email their results to the instructor.

After class, the instructor compares the groups' rankings and labelled samples to present them to the entire class during the next meeting. The instructor should especially note cases of either strong or problematic uptake, inviting discussion of possible alternative approaches for the latter. This review allows the class to see how major assignment goals can be met in diverse ways. This segment of the exercise is not meant to have one correct answer: groups do not have to arrive at the same requirement ranking. The expectation here is that students will rank major assignment goals, e.g., making an argument or critically selecting and using sources, toward the top of the list, and rank less important requirements, e.g., formatting or citation style, toward the bottom. Nor do students need to find similar or precise instances of requirement fulfillment in their texts. For example, my assignment sheet lists two main assignment goals in the opening paragraph: the first goal asks students to "analyze a genre produced by the same discourse community [they] studied for the Discourse Community Analysis (Assignment #2)." This goal is more generalized and is met by the

assignment itself in its entirety, so naturally students will find the author fulfilling this requirement in any number of ways.

Rationale

Assignment sheets as teaching tools are not a novel idea. Devitt et al. (2004) and Jankens (2019) have developed university-level exercises that involve reflection on the rhetorical situation of the assignment sheet and/or the student response (pp. 198-199; Figure 1). Bazerman (2004) has designed an activity for a sixth-grade course in which the instructor compares an assignment sheet with all of the responses produced by the class (pp. 337-338). This activity shows students the variety of ways the assignment goals can be met within the constraints of the assignment prompt. Unfortunately, it is not suitable for a university setting due to confidentiality issues and the greater complexity of university work. Tardy et al. (2022) mention an activity developed by a student teacher asking students to collect and compare assignment sheets from their disciplinary courses, thus promoting transfer to other academic contexts (pp. 5, 8).

The activity I propose combines elements of all four of these exercises. Since my assignment is itself a rhetorically-grounded genre analysis, I ask students to produce a ranking of requirements as opposed to a comprehensive rhetorical analysis of the assignment sheet as Devitt at al. (2004) and Jankens (2019) do. While instructors are free to follow these scholars in incorporating a rhetorical analysis component if they wish, in my case a simple ranking avoids confusing recursion. Additionally, Hodgson and Harris (2013) have shown how developing such a schema helps students understand assignment requirements, teaching them to read critically and rhetorically for the most significant goals as opposed to placing undue stress on relatively minor ones. For example, sometimes students place too much emphasis on requirements new to them, such as using an unfamiliar citation style. This practice of critical reading and evaluation will help them put this anxiety into perspective.

Ranking can also uncover potential misinterpretations of the assignment sheet so that they can be addressed long before students begin writing, as well as in subsequent iterations of the course. For example, although we reviewed the concept of invention questions and their purpose in class, one group included invention questions in their ranking of requirements during the first iteration of the activity. This confusion indicated that I needed to revisit the concept and specify that these questions were only aids for brainstorming and did not need to be answered completely and/or in order. I also added this line to the assignment sheet to preface the invention questions going forward: “As you

begin this assignment, consider some of these invention questions to help guide your analysis of your genre samples." The ranking process also prompted students to ask for clarification of concepts more foundational to the assignment, demonstrating the value of bringing questions to the instructor long before the due date. This kind of critical and proactive reading serves them well when interpreting future assignment sheets.

While I have noted why it is impractical in a university context, Bazerman's activity allows instructors to take advantage of "the power of relevant models" by reviewing how the entire class has responded to the assignment (Hardy et al., 2015, p. 1). The activity presented here offers the same benefits while focusing on examples of successful student uptake, clarifying university-level expectations for first-year students. Moreover, students not only see how the assignment goals "should" be met, but also the many ways in which they *could* be met. This guided exposure opens students up to the possibilities of their assigned genres. Genre scholars frequently caution that students should be taught to see genres as "invitations but not templates," frameworks useful to the rhetor that can be stretched or even broken as needed (Johns, 2002, p. 237; see also Bazerman, 2004; Tardy, 2017; Tardy et al., 2022; Wardle, 2009).

For example, the author of one of the genre analysis samples that students read opted to use a two-paragraph introduction structure. Due to their familiarity with the five-paragraph essay, several groups labelled the last sentence of the first paragraph as the thesis statement even though it was clearly not a proposed argument, while the last sentence of the second paragraph was. As Anne Freadman observes, "uptakes…have memories—long, ramified, intertexual, and intergeneric memories" (Freadman, 2002, p. 40; see also Clark, 2005). Throughout the course I dedicate class time to problematizing the five-paragraph essay and enriching students' view of academic writing structures. Nevertheless, these instances of uncritical reading show us that for many first-year university students, the five-paragraph structure still shapes their uptake of writing assignments; that is, in their view it remains the most appropriate way to structure academic writing. This mislabeling allowed us to discuss variation in genre conventions and the greater conceptual and organizational complexities of academic writing (Johns, 2002, 2008).

Several aspects of this activity were designed to promote knowledge transfer. The concept of the assignment sheet as a fundamental, interdisciplinary academic genre is introduced at the beginning of the activity, but students are reminded of it throughout. Like the student teacher mentioned by Tardy et al. (2022), the instructor explicitly asks the class to compare and contrast this assignment sheet to those encountered in other courses, facilitating interdisciplinary transfer and reinforcing

generic variation. Because assignment sheets serve a practical purpose across academic disciplines, they avoid classification as what Wardle (2009) calls "mutt genres" (p. 774). She defines these as genres typically assigned in FYC courses, such as the "argument/position paper" or the "autobiography/personal narrative," with the aim of preparing students for the genres and critical practices that they will use in their later disciplinary work. Since students use them in the context of the FYC course, she argues, removed from the specific rhetorical exigency of their prospective assignments, they serve no meaningful purpose outside that context and do not promote transfer as well as is presumed.

In her critique of the traditional FYC model, Wardle (2009) cites three research-based pedagogical methods that encourage knowledge transfer: "explicitly abstracting principles from a situation", "self-reflection", and "mindfulness" (p. 771). The ranking component of this activity facilitates students in abstracting principles from a situation, while the in-class review of each group's ranking and corresponding labelling helps students reflect on and reiterate their past thinking processes as they prepare to approach the assignment in earnest (Hodgson & Harris, 2013). Wardle (2009) defines "mindfulness" in the context of transfer as "a generalized state of alertness to the activities one is engaged in and to one's surroundings" (p. 771). The active learning component of the exercise helps students engage in the activity mindfully while reinforcing both the learning outcomes of the assignment and the practice of critical reading and comparative genre analysis (Bazerman, 2004).

Conclusion

Though both students and instructors tend to take this familiar classroom genre for granted, assignment sheets have formative impacts on learning, assessment, and undergraduate progress. Despite their widespread usage, students often have difficulty interpreting assignment sheets and applying their parameters to their own writing. Moreover, Bawarshi (2003) shows how student writers struggle to shift their rhetorical role from passive consumer of the writing prompt to active producer of its written response. As Bawarshi explains, "One way teachers can help students reposition themselves within such spheres of agency is to make genres analytically visible to students so that students can participate within and negotiate them more meaningfully and critically" (p. 141). In this paper, I have presented an activity inviting first-year students to analyze assignment sheets as a genre and to develop a practice of critical and proactive reading when approaching them. This exercise also promotes their awareness of the close generic and rhetorical relationship between

assignment sheets and the variety of student uptakes they generate, an awareness that will serve them well regardless of their year-level or discipline.

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Appendix: The Group Activity Slide

Understanding Assignment Sheets and Genre Awareness

1. Read the Genre Analysis Assignment Sheet.
2. Find the top 5 assignment requirements and rank them according to importance.
3. Read the Genre Analysis sample PDF assigned to your group.
4. Find and mark the places where the sample fulfills the requirements of the assignment that you ranked (with highlighting, comments, etc.).
5. Email your group's ranking and labelled PDF to me.

When ranking, remember the learning outcome of the assignment!