

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Academic Reading: Reading & Writing in the Disciplines and Academic Writing: Writing & Reading in the Disciplines

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Janet Giltrow. Academic Writing: Writing & Reading in the Disciplines, 3rd ed. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2002. ISBN 1-55111-395-3. 421 pages.

Janet Giltrow, ed. Academic Reading: Reading & Writing in the Disciplines, 2nd ed. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2002. ISBN 1-55111-393-7. 521 pages.

Janet Giltrow's second edition of *Academic Reading* and third edition of *Academic Writing* are a handy set for writing and rhetoric courses and an essential for every composition library. The books mark an important advance over Giltrow's already classic earlier editions. Both volumes offer more than their titles may suggest. *Academic Reading*, apart from providing an abundance of materials and ideas for writing classes, gives insight into the functioning of social "interest" in academic discourse. *Academic Writing*, on the other hand, by far outstrips a traditional writing handbook. Rather than merely recommending proper or effective style and organization, it problematizes the underlying assumptions of such recommendations.

Giltrow's approach is radically cognitive and social. She invites the reader to a thoughtful inquiry into the functional underpinnings of the genre of academic writing. Building on the idea that "style is meaningful", the author insists on the inherent and complex connectedness between thought, discourse, and society:

I would argue that there is no surface in writing, and that the stylistic qualities which tax our capacity to name them are more than skin-deep. And, moreover, I would suggest that the "originality" academics readers value *depends on style* — on the typical ways of speaking that produce certain kinds of knowledge of the world. (*Academic Writing*, p. 9)

Meaning is firmly rooted in agency. For example, Giltrow explains that lexical meaning represents nothing more than “the set of circumstances under which [a word] can be used”, and that the sources of meaning must be sought in the community (p. 126). The contingency of rhetoric on agency is a universal characteristic of all communication. In academic discourse, as in everyday contexts, linguistic and rhetorical patterning is both an effect and a cause of social relations and cognitive processes. This demonstration of the universality and common sense of rhetoric allows Giltrow to demystify and ‘disalienate’ the conventions of academic discourse.

Academic Reading includes nineteen scholarly articles in legal studies, philosophy, history, cultural and social studies, psychology, discourse analysis, anthropology, labour studies, rhetoric and composition. Two articles are narratives by Native Canadian women talking about their residential school years and family histories. Each work is introduced by a brief preview positioning it within the overall project, presenting the relevant terminology, and offering questions and discussion tips.

The thematic organization of the volume is noteworthy. The selections address the issues of “knowledge”, “margin and centre”, “work”, “community”, “solidarity”, “human migration” (p. 13), all conveniently falling under the topical umbrella “of the social order and forces immanent in it” (p. 7). This affinity of topics and approaches, however, does not deny their disciplinary specificity: a particular “orientation to the surrounding order” (p. 12) and a “distinctive interplay of abstractions” (p. 15) in each of the fields represented by the selections. Neither does the affinity suppress the dialectical nature of inquiry. The selections in *Academic Reading* epitomize the ongoing discussion of the origins and implications of the existing scholarly practices. While the prestige of research greatly depends on its assumed autonomy from commonsensical reasoning, it becomes increasingly clear that “[t]he rhetorical envelope around research discourse is not sealed but open” (p. 10). Giltrow argues that the authors in the volume make use of a “new technique of inquiry” that allows them to ‘naturalize’ the social aspects of academic discourse. This allows them to review the all-too-familiar toolbox of methodological assumptions, both common-sense and expert (p. 13).

The authors in *Academic Reading* do not stop at methodological introspection. They also probe the solidity of the academic claim to truth by exploring genre boundaries. Two themes are most perspicuous here: the nature and role of evidence and the social implications of scholarly practices. Eyewitness testimony figures in the volume as a respectable source of information. Moreover, ‘non-academic’ voices speak on their own behalf and bring into question the tradition of “homogenizing” the testimony according to “the universalizing practices of European culture” (p. 511). The practice of listening to people and communities, as opposed to observing human

subjects, provides a startling perspective on the social effects of academic and educational practices. It also reveals irreducible cognitive and ethical differences between the rhetorical traditions of academe and other social domains and warns researchers to “be careful about building... high-level platforms” of generalizations and abstractions over their evidential “landscapes” (p. 494). By immersing the students in this kind of discussion Giltrow aims at presenting the genre of academic writing as a field of continually emergent rather than ossified conventions, issues, and approaches.

In *Academic Writing* the task of critical inquiry into the genre moves to a more elemental level of discussion. In keeping with tradition, Giltrow discusses the nuts and bolts of academic discourse: summarizing and citation techniques, register, text structure, rhetorical strategies and linguistic patterns. Yet in contrast with the traditional approach, the technical matters are subsumed by a “deliberately broad definition of style” that also includes “global conditions of coherence and connectedness” and “conditions of assertion and presupposition” (p. 10). Giltrow’s *style* is not a decoration for ideas or a mold impressed on the subject matter for the sake of readability or aesthetic merit; it is the discursive index and cognitive substratum of agency. Thus no matter how elaborate her discussion of the conventions of academic writing, it is a means to an end in the inquiry into the more general issue of scholarly practices:

[I]f style is meaningful, we should ask *what it means*, and if style is a social action, we should ask what it does. We should ask by what principles a way of speaking organizes knowledge of the world, and organizes systems of association, solidarity, and advantage. (p. 12)

Central to the book is the idea that academic discourse is the medium for the scholarly “tribes” to engage in the process of “knowledge-making”. Language is a tool of agency, not a natural phenomenon existing beside it. The rigidity and stability of conventions are then contingent on the researchers’ goals and constantly mediated by the purposes and circumstances of particular research situations. “[T]he linguistic-pragmatic features” of scholarly discourse allow writers and readers to create mind-maps “guiding people to the kinds of thinking that are productive in those situations” (p. 11).

The focus on the purposes and effects of rhetorical choices is a signature of Giltrow’s method. The scholarly structural and cognitive patterns are both the object *and* the organizing principle of her book. The author’s stance as a well-informed colleague rather than an unquestionable authority greatly enhances the ethos of the book. The text demonstrates how research is driven by the community’s interests and resources, and how it is organized and presented to meet the audience’s needs. It speaks in a multitude of voices harmonized within the project of exploring the cog-

tive resources and social functions of the genre. The conditions of genre functionality are proposed based on the author's theoretical research and practical experience (including work at the Centre for Research in Academic writing at Simon Fraser University), while the "case of ethnography" in the last chapter exemplifies and elaborates her findings.

The intended audience of *Academic Reading* and *Academic Writing* are university undergraduates. In the introduction to *Academic Reading* Giltrow stresses that the students are invited to "estimate, listen carefully, surmise — and to join in" scholarly conversation (pp. 7–8). On the other hand, the topical organization and the scope and methods of inquiry in *Academic Writing* suggest a broader and at times more advanced readership. Here the particular issues under discussion are alternately addressed to writing students and instructors and, more generally, to scholars in the position of researchers and readers. The referential content of the 'discursive *you*' also follows these perspectival shifts.

Giltrow is well aware of the thematic and rhetorical openness of her book, as well as of the challenges of trying to impose a structure on an ongoing discussion:

So I have to ask: what kind of book is this? If it has so many questions and so few answers, does it belong to the textbook genre? Does it introduce newcomers to a discipline, as other university textbooks do? (p. 15)

This openness of *Academic Writing*, according to Giltrow, does not compromise its "how-to' function". On the contrary, she explains, the book "involves students in [writing in the disciplines] as *inquiry* — questions and conversations amongst those who are putting together a picture of research discourse" (p. 16). "[I]t asks students to shed some commonsense notions and adopt some specialist ones" (p. 15) while working out their own positions vis-à-vis the existing conventions.

The previous editions of Janet Giltrow's *Academic Reading* and *Academic Writing* (1995) are well known throughout North America. But they are also nothing short of a landmark in Canadian rhetoric and composition studies since the author makes extensive use of Canadian materials and addresses the issues relevant in the national academic context, in addition to the 'global' concerns of the field. In the new editions the quantitative and qualitative growth of the content is accompanied by a subtle yet essential methodological shift. The audiences are invited to enter the discussion as participants in scholarly life rather than observers, which makes the books a remarkably rich resource for the practice, instruction, and research in academic writing.