

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Genre Analysis of Project Proposals

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## Genre Analysis of Project Proposals

Sarah Swofford

### Overview

The purpose of this assignment is to help students develop a process for learning unfamiliar genres successfully. This assignment is the first part of a two-assignment sequence (the second part is “A Proposal for Change on Campus,” also found in this Assignment and Activities Archive) in a first-year writing course.

Being able to approach unfamiliar genres and have a process for composing them is often hailed as one of the ways that first-year writing teaches students transferable writing skills (Devitt; Driscoll et al.; Tardy et al.). Many expert writers have developed a process to do just that, and it often looks something like what has been described as “genre analysis” (Swales). This process allows the writer to identify and define the genre they’re examining, analyze the key communicative elements of that text and the essential functions those elements serve towards the genre’s purpose, find patterns and conventions that a practiced reader would expect to find, and consider how this genre works to accomplish for its intended audience.

Over the years, though, I’ve struggled to effectively teach this process to my students (even though I use it *all the time* as a writer). Helping them conceptualize *genre* not just as “text type,” but as a means of understanding how writers navigate their social roles and expectations (Miller) has proven tricky. The readings listed in the directions below have helped immensely in offering accessible explanations for the complex concepts of *discourse communities*, *genre*, and *move analysis* that undergird this particular assignment.

I’ve taught genre analysis to first-year students in this way at my

access-oriented university, but this assignment is very flexible, and I've successfully also used it with upper-division students in a Professional Writing course, Writing for Nonprofits. In the first-year course, the students in the class all analyze the same genre (a project proposal), and they then use their genre analyses to craft a proposal for change they'd like to see happen on our campus. At the upper-division, students analyze a genre requested by their nonprofit clients—each student analyzing a different genre than their classmates. They then compose the text requested by their clients, using the genre analysis to guide them. I typically end both courses by asking students to write a rationale, explaining how their second project is effective, how their first project guided their writerly choices in the second project, and what they'd do differently if they were to start over now.

### Time Commitment

5-7 weeks (about half of the semester)

### Materials

Students will need the “Project 1: Genre Analysis Assignment Sheet” (see below), which outlines my specific expectations for this project.

Students will need sample project proposals to examine. In the first-year courses, I typically model the steps of the genre analysis with three sample proposals that I provide, so students understand what the process of genre analysis looks like in action. I upload PDFs of these proposals to our Learning Management System (LMS), making sure that they are uploaded as text and not images, so they are accessible for screen readers. Students must also find three sample proposals of their own to complete the genre analysis steps with. They may use all six examples (my three and their three) in their project drafts, which also promotes in-class engagement as we work through the samples I've provided together.

I also provide model projects to my students, but I typically only give

them models that are analyzing a genre different from the one we are analyzing as a class. We unpack the models together (which is a little meta....a genre analysis of the model genre analysis....).

I use Eli Review for peer feedback in my first-year writing courses, so if you are using that or something similar, students will need access to the platform, and may need devices in class to complete or access their reviews and work in class. This assignment can be completed without a peer review platform, or you can use the peer review features in your institution's Learning Management System (LMS) Assignment Process

- I begin the semester by setting some groundwork for students to demonstrate that we're going to be teammates and problem-solvers this semester. I divide students into groups of 4-5. Each group is given a pack of playing cards, then they choose a card game to play. The group must trouble-shoot the game rules, teach the game to any members who aren't familiar with it, and then play until they have a winner. I switch up the groups a couple of times and repeat. We debrief, and talk about how each team started to develop their own goals as a group (this is a setup for the idea of discourse communities, and a way to get students comfortable working together from the very beginning of the semester—something that has been more and more necessary over the last few years as we've moved out of pandemic e-learning).
- Students read Dan Melzer's "Understanding Discourse Communities" and complete a reading response before they come to class, where they identify a discourse community they belong to, and explain how that group *is* a discourse community by offering an example for each of the 6 features. They can also explain what still feels unclear or confusing, and explain how this concept of discourse communities might be helpful for them as readers and writers.

- In the next class, we begin by reviewing one another's reading responses (I use a peer review platform, but this could easily be done on hard copy or through small group discussions). Students respond to what their classmates found unclear and to their explanations of how the concept of discourse communities is helpful for them as readers and writers. I use those reviews to guide the class conversation, and students work through the features of a discourse community. We zoom in on how discourse communities use genres to communicate and accomplish their shared goals, and I use that to set up basic rhetorical concepts.
- Before the next class, students read Kerry Dirk's "Navigating Genres." They also review the "Project 1 Assignment Sheet," and complete a reading response where they summarize in their own words what the assignment is asking them to do, describe what they understand about genre right then, and finally raise two questions about the assignment.
- In class, students work together to complete their first piece of scaffolding for the major project. I call these smaller assignments "building blocks." I give them one example of a project proposal, and they find basic information about that example—citation information, context, etc. Then they find a second proposal example and do the same. They finish by comparing these two examples and describing what they notice in that comparison. They can finish this building block for homework if time runs out in class.
- Before the next class, students read "Make Your Move: Writing in Genres," by Johnson et al. Over the next few classes, we review the process described in this reading, and students use the chart on page 223 to compare samples. I bring different types of recipes to class and have students look

at them in groups. We practice identifying the “moves” of each recipe (some recipes list equipment, but others don’t, for example), and we create a chart like the one on page 223 for our recipe samples. Then I give them three project proposal samples (one at a time, starting with the one I gave them for Building Block 1), and they find another two sample proposals, and they practice move analysis with their six project proposal samples. As a class, we use the samples I provide together and fill out the chart collectively before I ask them to work individually on their samples. I give them a blank chart to help them keep track of the moves they notice (this chart becomes “Building Block 2”), and I encourage them to take notes or annotate their project proposal samples. We pause regularly and students take a moment to synthesize their observations about this genre so far.

- Students complete “Building Block 3” on their own. In this building block, they answer four questions about their move analysis and the conclusions they’re drawing. This piece of the project’s scaffolding is intended to help students put the moves they’ve identified into the context of the genre as a whole, instead of focusing on any one given proposal sample. The questions for this building block are as follows:
  - List the moves from your Building Block 2, then note whether that move is obligatory, common, optional, or rare.
  - For each of the moves you listed above, explain briefly what you think this move does for the reader (for example, a list of equipment needed on a recipe might help a less experienced cook know what to gather or purchase before beginning the recipe, while an experienced cook would likely only need a list of *atypical* equipment because they’d already have a sense of the basic equipment needed. A list of equipment, then,

might give us a sense of how experienced the writer expects the reader to be).

- What variations do you notice across samples you've looked at, and what do you make of that variation? What ideas do you need to keep track of here for your Project 1 draft?
- What do you notice about the language choices in your samples? Are there specific headings, for example, you see repeated? Specific, common phrases across different samples? Is the level of formality or informality consistent or inconsistent across your samples?
- Students review one another's Building Block 3s on a peer review platform, and then in class I debrief those building blocks and reviews. In the same class, I pass out three student model genre analyses, and the students work in groups to compare them and clarify their understanding of what their first draft should look like.
- Students read Anne Lamott's "Shitty First Drafts," from the book *Bird by Bird*, and we discuss how writing "shitty first drafts" can be beneficial for their writing process. They write a "Shitty First Draft" of their Genre Analysis and peer review one another's drafts.

We debrief their peer reviews and drafts together in class, and students complete a revision plan. I use the revision plan feature on a peer review platform, but I've also had great success in asking students to fill out a chart on paper where they list the feedback they've received, how they react to that feedback, and make a specific and actionable plan for how they'll use the feedback. They revise their drafts. In class, we work on specific skills that emerged from the drafts (most frequently, paragraphing and organization or the like).

Finally, students complete a “Pre-Conference Draft” and then meet with me individually for feedback in lieu of coming to a class meeting. They also peer review one another’s drafts. They complete a revision plan on the peer review platform (you can also use the revision plan I describe in the paragraph above if you’re not using a peer review platform or peer review on your LMS. They revise and submit a “Post-Conference Draft,” which is their final draft.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Develop an understanding of *genre*, and of how genres work for readers and writers.
- Analyze the conventions of an unfamiliar genre and make an argument about what would comprise a successful example of that genre.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a text as an example of a given genre.

## Learning Accommodations

- Much of the class time for this project will take place in groups, and the roles of each student in the group can be adapted to meet the individual needs of learners (some students can take notes, for example, while other students are tasked with looking for evidence in the samples they’re analyzing, and still other students keep track of their classmates’ overarching ideas). The level of structure required for the groups can likewise be adapted depending on the needs of your students. Some groups may need less



structure, while others need more.

- You can use your modeling in class to offer accommodations for learners as well—your students may need more or less modeling and examples than I describe here, and you can adapt to suit your learners.
- Material in this unit can be presented in multiple modalities
- The genre you’re analyzing in this project is very flexible. You could analyze a short video, a specific genre of podcasts, or visual texts, for example, instead of a traditional print text like proposals. I often use recipes in different styles and modalities. You could also choose to analyze more traditional academic genres like literature reviews, research papers, or annotated bibliographies if your learners need more support with academic writing conventions.

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