Writing Spaces

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The Grammar of Text Messaging: Analyzing Non-Standard English to Develop Genre Awareness

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Overview

In every course I teach, I work to instill in students the understanding that Standard English is merely one variety among many, rather than a superior form. In this assignment, students are asked to write an essay that analyzes the "grammar" of their own writing in a non-academic text. Students often choose to analyze journal entries, text messages, social media posts, and forum posts (such as on reddit). To make up the bulk of the essay, I ask them to consider what rules they follow in this writing. For instance, how do they capitalize and punctuate sentences? What vocabulary do they use (shortened forms, invented words, discourse community-specific)? How do they structure their ideas? Do they use emojis, images, or other non-text (multimodal) ways to communicate? All these *rules* can be classified as *grammar*.

What is interesting about this assignment is that it invites students to recognize this sort of writing, often devalued in higher education, as full of complex choice and meaning. In their analysis, students may note the difference that a period makes at the end of a text message or how placing a certain emoji after a sentence will entirely change its tone. Additionally, students will see that their awareness of text messaging, blogging, and social media rules, to give a few examples, is specialized knowledge; it is genre awareness, in other words. By asking students to decode their chosen non-academic genre of writing, they are given the tools to decode more traditional genres of writing. This allows them the opportunity to think critically about the supposed superiority of Standard English. We tend to think of Standard English as the only variety that follows grammar rules, with all other varieties breaking those rules. However, with this assignment, my hope is that

students recognize that all writing follows its own internal grammar. Someone who may be an excellent writer in Standard English may miss the nuances of text message communication completely.

This essay works well as a 1500-2100-word assignment, but it can be adapted to various lengths. I also ask students to include at least 3 outside sources to support their arguments. I provide the articles listed below under Materials, which they are welcome to use if they apply to their chosen topic.

Time Commitment

1-2 weeks

Materials

It would be helpful to assign Kerry Dirk's "Navigating Genres," available in Writing Spaces Vol. 1, and Dan Melzer's "Understanding Discourse Communities," available in Writing Spaces Vol. 3, for terms and concepts that will be helpful for students as they navigate this assignment. Additionally, I assign the articles listed under "Further Reading" below to provide examples of essays similar to this assignment as well as context on genre awareness; they may also use those articles as sources in their papers if relevant.

Assignment Process

- Students will start by listing the kinds of writing they have done in school. Common examples include personal narrative, research paper, critical analysis, lab report, and summary. The instructor will explain how each of these forms falls into different genres of writing and will introduce the concept of genre more broadly. Students may have read Kerry Dirk's "Navigating Genres" before this class meeting, and/or the instructor may refer to it for useful explanations and examples.

- The instructor will then ask students: How do you write well in these genres? What grammar, sentence structure, style, etc. do you follow? Who is your audience? In other words, what do you need to do in these genres to earn a good grade on the assignment?

- Next, the instructor will shift the focus to the kinds of writing students do *outside* of school and in which they have some expertise. (For example, text messaging, posting on Instagram, or writing in a video game forum.) Students will brainstorm their answers in small groups and share with the class.

- The instructor will explain how these forms fall into genres, too, and will ask students similar questions to the above: How do you write well in these genres? Who do you communicate with (or who is your audience)? How do others show awareness or a lack of awareness in this genre? The instructor will bring the class together as a large group to list some of their ideas. The instructor will explain that all of these genre "rules" can be called the "grammar" of their genre, drawing students' attention to the complexity of these so-called unsophisticated forms.

- The instructor will introduce the concept of linguistic justice, optionally with the help of Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English?", which emphasizes the points above about standard English being one variety among many and the complexity of nonstandard varieties of writing.

- Then, the instructor will provide the prompt for the assignment: "Write an essay that analyzes the 'grammar' of your writing in a non-academic text." This can be accompanied by examples of topics students have chosen previously, e.g., the grammar of Taylor Swift (or Swiftie)

fandom on X (Twitter) or the grammar of a Finsta account.

- Next, students will choose a topic and outline its important grammatical features. Focuses may include vocabulary, syntax, point of view, tone, audience, and formatting. Students should be encouraged to provide direct examples from their text to prove their argument, in the same way they would provide textual evidence to write any critical analysis.

- Next, students will identify and implement sources they can use to support their argument. I provide the sources listed below in "Further Reading" to get them started.

- Optionally, students may exchange outlines to offer each other feedback, especially if multiple students are familiar with the same genre. They may also submit a draft to receive feedback from their instructor.

- Finally, students will submit a final draft (in light of the feedback they've received.)

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Analyze linguistic and rhetorical choices and how they shape meaning

- Gain an understanding of genre awareness

- Think critically about what defines Standard English, who determines its value, and how they can use Standard English when appropriate

- Recognize the value and patterns within multiple varieties of English

- Begin conversations about linguistic justice

Learning Accommodations

- Students are encouraged to submit multimodal essays using image and text.

- Students may present their findings to the class as a slideshow/PowerPoint if the instructor allows.

- Materials should be available on the course website as well as delivered in-person or via Zoom/remote.

Works Cited

Dirk, Kerry. "Navigating Genres." *Writing Spaces*, Vol. 1. Edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, Parlor Press, 2010, https://writingspaces.org/past-volumes/navigating-genres/

Melzer, Dan. "Understanding Discourse Communities." *Writing Spaces*, Vol. 3. Edited by Dana Driscoll, Mary Stewart, and Matthew Vetter, Parlor Press, 2020, https://writingspaces.org/past-volumes/grammar-rhetoric-and-style/

Further Reading

Curzan, Anne. "Says Who? Teaching and Questioning the Rules of Grammar." PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, vol. 124, no. 3, 2009, pp. 870–79, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.870.

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Marlatt, Rick. "Capitalizing on the Craze of Fortnite: Toward a
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        Construct Communities of Practice." *Journal of Education*
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Roiphe, Katie. "Instagram? I Can't Even Deal." *Financial Times*. 22
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Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Should Writers Use They Own
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