Interview a Professor: Genres in Discourse Communities

The purpose of this assignment is to get a feel for how genres work within different disciplines or discourse communities – to understand the relationship between meaning and how it is communicated. We are always writing to someone, so understanding what your reader expects from your writing is crucial to good communication. But these expectations are born within discourse communities (an academic discipline is one kind of discourse community), and each community has unique ways of creating knowledge – from how members gather information to what kind of information is privileged.

Some preliminary information about the large differences in epistemology, ideology and axiology is helpful as you move into disciplinary communities and encounter new genres.

You will be interviewing one of your professors – or a professor in your major, if you prefer. This will accomplish several things:
- help you become better acquainted with a professor you might not otherwise meet outside of the classroom
- help you understand the conversations (questions and writings) in a discipline you might be interested in working in
- help you understand that the “university” is made up of lots of very different discourse communities with very different ideas about things

Step 1: identify the discipline
1. Decide who you want to interview and identify the discipline you will be learning about.
2. Learn a bit about the larger the disciplinary group your discipline fits within:
   - arts & humanities ❖ social sciences ❖ hard sciences

   a. Lists of disciplines – here are 3 possible sources:
      (1) Norlin “find articles page”  http://libraries.colorado.edu/screens/findarticles.html
      (2) CU Webpage .... click on the links (look for departments)  http://colorado.edu/academics/

   b. Check out the RIOT tutorial “Thinking.” You an access RIOT through D2L. Your link should look something like this:  RIOT Writing and Information Literacy Spring 2013. RIOT has a good explanation of the basic differences between the humanities, social sciences, and “hard” sciences.

   c. Devitt, Reiff and Bawarshi write about the social sciences on page 161 of Scenes of Writing. DR&B give you a head start with the social sciences, but there may be disciplinary differences beyond (or underneath) their fairly general comments. And they don’t analyze the hard sciences or the arts & humanities for you.
Step 2: set up the interview with your professor

1. I suggest you pick a professor from whom you are taking a class, if possible. This will help you meet one of your professors. Plus professors have regularly scheduled office hours, so finding a time for an interview should be less of a challenge.

2. Schedule an interview. Even if your professor has drop-in office hours, it’s a courtesy to arrange a time. You can usually do this over email.

3. Reference our writing class website (misc info) for tips on how to conduct an interview.

Step 3: prepare interview questions

1. Create a set of interview questions. Interview questions should guide your discussion, but not dictate exactly how the interview goes. You want your professor to simply talk – if you could anticipate everything he or she had to say, there would be no need for an interview.

2. Your interview questions should have two foci:
   a. Compiling a list of genres used in the discipline your professor works in.

   Berkenkotter and Huckin: “Genre conventions signal a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology.”

   The thinking habits of the discipline are embodied in its genres, and by examining those genres you can learn the norms (standards and customs), epistemology (how you know what you know about the nature of reality), ideology (system of beliefs that tell you what exists, what is true and good, what is possible), and social ontology (social/cultural beliefs about the nature of reality).

   One of your major writing assignments is a literature review – you might ask your professor whether literature reviews are written in their discipline and, if so, what they are like.

   b. Questions designed to get at the epistemology, ideology and axiology of the discipline. (Look up the words if you don’t know what they mean!)

   Ever heard the phrase “thinking like a lawyer”? Well, lawyers think like lawyers, engineers think like engineers, historians think like historians, and the list goes on. What that means is that each discipline approaches a problem from a specific angle, asks certain kinds of questions designed for specific purposes, conducts certain kinds of research, finds certain kinds of evidence persuasive, performs certain kinds of analysis.

   Sometimes you don’t have to “discover” what those norms and ideals are – you can just ask.

   c. Questions designed to help you function within the discipline as a student.
d. A list of sample questions:
   (1) As an academic, what kind of things do you do for your job?
   (2) Which of those activities involve writing?
   (3) What kinds of things [genres] do you write? For your job or elsewhere (other
discourse communities)?
   (4) What kinds of things do practitioners write in your field?
   (5) How does what a practitioner writes differ from what you write?
   (6) What percentage of your time is spent writing?
   (7) What is your writing process?
   (8) What kinds of writing do your require of your students?
   (9) What are the major problems you see in student writing?
   (10) What kinds of research questions do people in your discipline ask?
   (11) What kinds of evidence do people in your discipline use?

e. You will hand in your interview questions.

Step 4: interview your professor

Step 5: collect samples
Gather samples of the genres used by people in your discipline. Your professor should be able to
direct you to journals where you can find articles written in that discipline.

Step 6: analyze your data
Go over your information, and look for ways that the genres used by those in a discipline or
discourse community reflect the values of the discipline. Ask yourself questions like:
   a. Genres – what do the genre conventions tell you about the epistemology, ideology and
axiology of the individual discipline and the larger disciplinary category?
   b. Comments of your disciplinary experts – what do the answers by your professor tell
you about the values of the discipline?
   c. What are the purposes and goals of the community? What kinds of questions does the
discipline ask?
   d. What are the norms for "good writing" in the discipline? For example, does the
discipline value objectivity? Or is subjectivity allowed? Is research always quantitative?
Is qualitative research allowed?
   e. Texts: what are the typical genres use by members of this discourse community? Is
there a difference between academic and practical genres?
   f. Topics: what subjects are written on in this discourse community?
   g. Terminology /jargon: what specialized language is used and why is it used? Provide
examples.
   h. Joining the discourse community – how does one become an insider? What are the
writing activities and roles of discourse community members?
Step 7: write a note/memo to file

1. Memorialize (make a record) of your interview and how it went by writing a “note to file” (also called a “memo to file.”
2. Read the genre analysis at the end of this assignment.
3. Use a simple memo heading
4. Briefly describe your interview, then write up your analysis so that you can discuss your conclusions about the discipline/discourse community you investigated in class.
5. The note/memo to file should be 2 – 3 pages in length. It may be single spaced.
6. Attach
7. You will receive a letter grade for this assignment.
8. The grading rubric is in a separate file. Take a look at what I will be looking for before you begin the assignment.