Learning to Write in My Discipline: Discourse Community and Rhetorical Analysis

For the first project of the course, you will identify types of writing frequently produced and read in your discipline and describe the most notable features of each form. You will also find a sample document from *one* of these genres and perform a rhetorical analysis of that document, emphasizing how this document works in your discourse community.

Please highlight the different genres that *your* major or concentration would engage in.

Getting Started—the Research Component

This assignment picks up from our reading about discourse communities. It's important to take stock of how our disciplines use writing and communication tools.

You will methodically create a list of forms of writing, or genres, commonly used in your field. Many of these types you already know— such as, emails, scholarly articles, proposals, music reviews—and other types you may be less familiar with. (I am using the terms genres, forms, and types interchangeably for this assignment.)

Begin by listing the forms you feel you know, and then gather information to expand this list. To gather this information, you'll need to do some fieldwork.

Fieldwork

- Talk to professors in your discipline, asking them what they think are the types of texts produced and read in the field.
- Talk to peers in your field and learn what they say are commonly used texts.
- Talk to professionals (here's where contacts you've made through co-op or internships are helpful) to see what texts they produce and read.
    - This fieldwork may take some time, so begin now to set up phone, email, or face-to-face contact.
    - If you are not familiar with the texts these people name, find out more by asking and then, if possible, seeing examples of the texts.
- Do some research on the professional organizations that make up your discipline. What types of writing are they mentioning? Write those down to inquire about with professionals or others.

Things to Know about Each Genre – Some Rhetorical Analysis

Find answers to these questions. You don't have to have complete knowledge of all these questions, but know most of them. These questions constitute a "rhetorical analysis," a phrase that we'll use in Part Three of this assignment. Use these questions to guide you.

1.) What is the purpose of this genre? Does it seek to inform, instruct, analyze, persuade, argue, evaluate, or entertain? Some combination of these purposes? Or something else?

2.) Who is the usual audience for this genre? Is this form typically written for members of the community or for outsiders? Is the audience multiple or unified? Are different audiences targeted by different components of the text? Is the genre primarily targeted to equals, experts, or beginners?

3.) Is there a typical persona for the genre? Is it characterized by certain tones, voices, or styles? Is there a lot of variation in persona or does the genre tend to be consistent in this regard?

4.) Is there a typical look and design to the genre? How is it published? Electronically or hardcopy? Is the genre typically multi-modal, with links, visuals, attachments, etc. included?

5.) Consider other aspects of style and design that are typical, such as sentence length, level of sophistication of vocabulary, sentence complexity, use of specialized language. How are visuals incorporated? Where? How much? With captions?

The Final Project

Your final Project 1 should have **three** components:

I. Research narrative—in about 500 words, describe how you gathered your information for this assignment. (Some guiding questions) Who did you talk to? What is their level of expertise or experience in the field? How did you contact your professional sources? Did you search on-line, use library databases, other sources? Did you see samples of all the genres on Part II (below)? What was most challenging and productive about this research step of the assignment?

II. List all the genres you think are used in your discipline.
   a. Divide this list into three distinct categories: writing for a scholarly audience; writing for a public audience; writing for a professional audience.
   b. Give a *brief* (1-3 sentence) description of each—purpose, context, audience. You *do* need to address all three elements.

  c. Students who do really well on this part typically have more than ten genres.

 III. **Find an example** of one document that you think truly exemplifies your discourse community. This could be a professional, public, or academic document, but it will likely be a professional or academic document. Perform a rhetorical analysis on this document, taking into account not only word choice and other textual features, but design features as well. If you're really performing an in-depth analysis, you should aim for at least 500 words.
  a. You must turn in a copy of this document so I can evaluate it, as well, so make sure to include a link or a PDF.
  b. Remember, you're making a case for how *this document* exemplifies the discourse community you've described – so some arguing is necessary.

Another Way to Think About Part Two is to think about an Alien…

Imagine you're an alien (like Marvin the Martian) and you've come across this document. What is it about the document that informs the alien what kind of genre it is, and what discourse community it belongs to? Is there a specific format? Tone? Vocabulary? Audience?

From an email exchange I had with a student in the recent past about this concept and how to apply it to the project:

- I'd recommend that you imagine that you're writing to a very smart alien computer - the "alien" part of the computer has *no idea* what you're talking about, so you have to explain your terms, situations, audiences, etc., thoroughly, BUT you only have to explain it once, since it's a computer.
- What kind of guidance and description do you need to give so that the alien computer understands what it's looking at? If the alien computer came across this genre of writing - say contracts - how would it *know* that it's a contract? (This kind of description, if concise, can apply to Part II as well!)

Don't take the details for granted – the alien doesn't *know*! It's better, in this part, to over-describe than not to describe enough. Remember, you're demonstrating an analysis and familiarity with these three chosen genres.

 – For example, if you describe the tone of the document as "a bit dry" – that's a great description – but the alien computer might think, "Of course it is dry – it is paper." ☺ So provide an example of what "dry tone" might mean in this context.