Genre Analysis for Novice L2 Writers: 
Sample Activities and Suggestions for Implementation

Gordon MYSKOW*

This article describes various ways genre analysis activities can be used with novice writers when teaching common academic writing assignments such as the short persuasive essay and the academic summary. The article focuses specifically on analysis activities designed to help learners gain a deeper understanding of the social dimension of academic writing, while not overwhelming them with the complexities of written genres. A number of practical suggestions for implementing genre analysis activities with novice writers are also discussed.

Key words: genre analysis, academic writing, secondary school, novice writers

Recent approaches to genre analysis emphasize the dynamic, socially-situated, and goal-oriented nature of written and spoken genres (e.g., Biber & Conrad, 2010; Bhatia, 2004; Devitt, 2002; Johns, et al. 2006; Martin & Rose, 2008; Swales, 2004). In the field of second language writing, there has been much criticism of instructional approaches that oversimplify academic genres as static sets of predictable linguistic patterns divorced from the social contexts in which they are used (Coe, 2002; Hyland, 2003; Johns, 1997, 2008; Tardy, 2009). Some insist that the teaching of these text templates may even be harmful, possibly “functioning like first language interference” (Coe, 2002, p.201) as students struggle to transfer their simplistic genre theories to new assignments with different rhetorical goals.

However, presenting an overly complex view of academic genres too early in the instructional process could significantly increase the learning burden for novice writers. As Tardy (Johns, et al. 2006) points out when discussing instructional activities aimed at developing a richer understanding of academic genres, “these activities can help learners build a more complex view of genre, but may also be overwhelming...for through such activities, teachers might prematurely situate novices into the expert domain” (p.239). A major challenge of teaching academic genres to novice writers then is to meet the needs and abilities of learners while resisting the temp-

* A lecturer in the Faculty of Economics, and a member of the Institute of Human Sciences at Toyo University
tation to present an overly simplistic view of them.

This article explores ways that common academic writing assignments for novice writers, such as the short persuasive essay and the academic summary, can be reframed as meaningful, socially-embedded, goal-oriented tasks. The article details various genre analysis activities and offers practical suggestions for implementing these activities with novice writers.

**Genre analysis and academic writing**

Genre analysis as an instructional method has been used across a variety of contexts to help learners use genres to meet the particular socio-rhetorical goals of a writing task (see Hyland, 2004; Paltridge, 2001; Swales & Feak, 1994). An important aim of genre analysis activities is to make learners more aware of how texts and social contexts are connected. One simple analysis activity recommended by Swales and Feak (1994) involves analyzing the same sentence written in different ways for two different audiences. Students then engage in group or class discussions considering how the sentences are different and possible explanations for these differences.

Hyland (2004) describes one activity that requires students to analyze different genres for particular interpersonal textual features, such as the personal pronoun “I”. Students are first asked to count and tabulate all the occurrences of the pronoun in a particular genre. They then compare their results and discuss reasons for these differences.

To help familiarize students with common organizational patterns of a genre, Swales and Feak (2001) suggest having them color code a number of instances of a genre to identify its discourse structure. Paltridge (2001) recommends expanding this activity by asking learners to create a flow chart representing the genre’s common organizational patterns. More elaborate approaches to genre analysis include the use of ethnographic research to help learners gain insights into the beliefs, values and rhetorical tendencies of a particular discourse community (e.g., Johns, 1997; Swales, 1990). This type of research could involve students observing or interviewing genre users, or “informants” and then collating this data into a mini-ethnography that details the various rhetorical techniques and linguistic features of the target genre (Reiff, 2006 in Johns, et al. 2006, p.243).

In the Japanese EFL secondary school context, Myskow and Gordon (2010) show how they used a variation of ethnographic research to help prepare students to write personal statements for the universities they hoped to attend. Students were encouraged to collect a range of data, from interviews with university students to notes from campus visits and information about particular professors, including any books or articles they may have written. Students were then asked to analyze sample application letters to see how perceived beliefs and values of university administrators were represented in letters written by different candidates.

One feature all these genre analysis activities share is an inductive method used to help students gain insights into the relation between written texts and the social contexts in which they are used. With careful planning these types of activities can have a number of benefits. First, as some second language acquisition research-
ers argue (e.g., Ellis, 1990; Long, 1988), activities that require students to “notice” discourse features such as grammar and vocabulary in the contexts in which they are used can enhance language learning. Second, focusing on text analysis skills rather than rules of composition may lead to more reflective engagement on the part of the learner and potentially greater learner autonomy. Third, the sample texts used for these activities can provide a rich resource of language input that can greatly aid novice writers who may have little exposure to academic genres.

Depending on the needs and abilities of the learners, teachers could also include sample texts for analysis that vary in how they accomplish rhetorical goals, which can help learners develop more flexible views of the ways academic discourse is patterned. In these activities, students could also be encouraged to examine a broad range of textual considerations from larger organizational patterns to salient grammar and vocabulary.

**Analyzing the academic summary genre**

Summarizing information from books or articles is a writing task type commonly required by university professors across a range of disciplines (Horowitz, 1986). In Japan, the new course of study formally released in 2008 and 2009 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) identifies summarizing as a communicative task common to all courses at the senior secondary school level (MEXT, 2011, p.6).

Myskow (2011) suggests having secondary school students in this context write summaries of their course readings for an audience of younger peers. The purpose of this writing task is to help other students understand the types of texts they will be reading in the upcoming year. Clearly specifying the audience and purpose in this way could raise awareness among learners of the communicative nature of academic writing and might even help to make the task less challenging. As Hyland (2004) points out, “an idea of who the audience is gives us a greater understanding of what we can assume our reader/hearer knows and what we need to explain and support” (p.4). The following sample activities expand upon Myskow’s (2011) recommendation for teaching the academic summary by looking at particular genre analysis activities that take the social context as the entry point of analysis.

**Sample summary activity 1: Analyzing the writing context**

When analyzing a writing context, investigative techniques like ethnographic research could be useful in helping writers gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs, values and background knowledge of their envisioned readers (e.g., Johns, 1997; Myskow & Gordon, 2010; Swales, 1990). For this particular task, however, the target audience—a group of younger peers in the same school—will likely be familiar to the writers, so there will be little need for extensive research. Nevertheless, it is important that writers are keenly aware that their summaries need to be written with attention to the needs of their readers, including their language ability, and the extent
of background knowledge of the topic they may have. Without careful consideration of such factors, the summaries may be inaccessible to their readers and therefore would not effectively accomplish the rhetorical goal of helping their audience understand the types of texts they will be reading in the upcoming school year.

The first genre analysis activity is a variation of Swales and Feak’s (1994) task that requires students to compare two similar texts written for two different audiences. In sample summary [1], the first sentence identifies the main topic of the reading passage as second language acquisition and in [2] the main idea is learning a second language. While readers could undoubtedly use their dictionaries to find the meaning of “acquisition”, it seems unnecessary to include such a difficult word in the first sentence of the summary. Moreover, [1] uses a more academic register for the claim that learners of a second language should not be overly concerned about their mistakes while [2] states simply that they should not worry about their mistakes. After analyzing these texts, learners will likely agree that sample text [2] is better suited to their audience of younger peers because the language would likely be more accessible to them.

[1] This reading passage is about second language acquisition. The author describes several important considerations when learning a second language. First, he states that people should not be overly concerned about their mistakes. In fact, he claims that making mistakes is a necessary condition for language acquisition. Second, he argues that regular vocabulary study is extremely important. According to the author, studying many new words at one time is not the most effective way to study. Finally, ...

[2] This reading passage is about learning a second language. The author gives some advice about how to learn a second language. First, he says that people should not worry when they make mistakes. In fact, he claims that making mistakes is necessary for learning a new language. Second, he argues that it is important to study vocabulary regularly. According to the author, studying many new words at one time is not a good idea. Finally, ...

It is common when teaching summarizing to focus on paraphrasing. But this rhetorical strategy is often represented as an asocial activity involving the simple changing of words into one’s own. As Myskow (2011) points out, a clearly defined audience and purpose for a summary allows the teacher to reframe paraphrasing as a communicative act between the reader and writer. When this rhetorical technique is represented in terms of its communicative potential “it [becomes] not just a question of substituting different words to avoid plagiarism, but selecting words that the audience is more likely to understand” (Myskow, 2011, p.20).

Sample summary activity 2: Analyzing reported speech

The following genre analysis activity focuses more narrowly on the resources used to reference others’
speech or ideas in another text. These language functions are sometimes referred to in the literature as “reported speech” (e.g., Caldas-Coulthard, 1994) “evidentials” (Thomas & Hawes, 1994) or “attributions” (Martin & White, 2005).

In sample summaries [1] and [2] the resources used to reference the author’s ideas include the prepositional phrase according to as well as the reporting verbs describes, states, and claims. To draw learners’ attention to these phrases, they could be asked to highlight or underline all of the reported speech phrases in the text. Students could then be asked to analyze these features for their form and function. In terms of form, an analysis will reveal that the verbs states and claims can be followed by an object in the form of a that-clause, while describes is followed by a noun phrase.

The meaning and function of these resources could also be explored by learners. The verb claim is traditionally described as a way of reporting information that may not be considered clear or obvious (e.g., Celcia-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.703). In [2] for example, the statement he claims that making mistakes is necessary for learning a new language goes beyond the widely held belief that mistakes are common or even inevitable to a bolder and potentially more contentious belief that they are actually necessary. But this definition of claim as reporting non-obvious facts or beliefs provides only a very limited, semantic description and offers little insight into how this verb is actually used by writers/speakers to communicate with their audiences. Caldas-Coulthard (1994) points out that the use of claim allows an author to “[detach] him/herself from responsibility of what is being reported” (p.295). Thus, an author can use claim to create rhetorical distance from the ideas in the text, allowing him/her to simultaneously report and evaluate them.

This example illustrates how linguistic features of a text could be conceptualized, not just in terms of form or meaning, but how they function to position the author in relation to the ideas being reported. Depending on the number of samples that clearly illustrates the function of these verbs analysis activities could be done inductively or more deductively with teacher fronted explanations.

The sample summaries provided here were written by the author for illustrative purposes. Whenever possible, however, it is recommended that writing samples from actual students be used for analysis activities. This could help to illuminate the specific issues that learners encounter when writing in these genres. It is also recommended that more than two sample texts be used for genre analysis activities so that learners can gain a deeper appreciation of the types of rhetorical options available to them and how texts may be written differently to address different audiences. For this particular activity, it is also recommended that the sample summaries be based on texts other than the ones students will be summarizing for their peers. This may help to reduce the possibility of students borrowing extensively from the sample texts.
Analyzing the persuasive essay

Another writing task that is often used with novice writers is the persuasive essay. There has been much debate about the pedagogical value of this task type. Some have argued that this simplistic text-template, often conforming to a five paragraph theme, is not reflective of the types of discipline-specific assignments at university and may even make it more difficult to learn more complex genres that do not conform to this static structure (e.g., Coe, 2002; Johns, 2008; Leki, 2006).

When describing the experiences of many first year university students who are over-reliant on such static text-templates as the five-paragraph essay, Johns (2008) claims that “they can, and do, fall on their faces when they attempt to read and produce texts in their [mainstream] classrooms” (p.250). Leki (2006) even describes one university department in which the traditional five paragraph theme was so disdained by faculty that teachers were told to give no more than a C-on papers that conformed to this pattern because students “could be assumed to not have thought seriously about the topic” (p.63). Johns (2002) argues that learners simplistic theories of writing need to be “destabilized” so that students are better able to cope with the complex, socially situated nature of academic discourse.

In many contexts, however, text templates like the short persuasive essay are still highly valued, as evidenced in their place on major tests of academic ability for second language learners including the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL®). In the Japanese secondary school context, Myskow (2011) suggests providing learners with a clear purpose and audience for their persuasive essays. Like the discussion of the academic summary in the previous section, the following sample activities develop Myskow’s (2011) suggestion by describing particular genre analysis activities that aim to develop a richer understanding of the social dimension of academic writing. In keeping with Myskow’s (2011) suggestion, the audience of the persuasive essay is specified as foreign students and the purpose of the task is to recommend a place to visit in Japan. Like the academic summary, the writers are Japanese senior secondary school students.

Sample persuasive essay activity 1: Analyzing the writing context

The audience of foreign students for the persuasive essay will likely be far less familiar to Japanese secondary school students than the audience of younger peers for the academic summary described in the previous section. Therefore, in order to convince this audience to visit a particular place, learners need to develop an understanding of the perceived beliefs, values and background knowledge of their readers. In-depth contextual analysis activities and even variations of ethnographic research techniques could be useful in helping to familiarize learners with their audience. Depending on the amount of time and resources available, such analysis activities could range from classroom brainstorming activities about the perceived beliefs, values and background knowledge of their readers to the use of interviews or surveys. Students could interview others who have been
abroad for extended periods of time and question them about the types of beliefs and knowledge that people in
other countries seemed to have about Japan. A possibly more effective way of collecting this information would
be to interview or survey actual foreign students about what they believed or knew about Japan before arriving.
A pen-pal system with foreign students could also be an excellent way to elicit this type of information.

Sample persuasive essay activity 2: Analyzing essay introductions

One common approach to teaching essay introductions is to highlight the tendency for them to proceed
from general to more specific information and finally to the main idea of the essay, or the thesis statement.
While this may be a useful conceptual frame for some students, describing introductions in such purely struc-
tural terms does little to show how this segment of discourse may be used across a variety of audiences to ac-
complish different rhetorical goals. Figure 1 shows the instructions for a sample genre analysis activity that can
be used to draw students’ attention to the ways that considerations of purpose and audience may be made in the
introductions of essays. The purpose of the first task is to simply familiarize students with different rhetorical
options for writing introductions that include providing a personal anecdote, an interesting/surprising fact or stat-
tistic or a relevant historical description. The purpose of the second task in Figure 1 is to develop an understanding
of how the perceived beliefs and values of a community of readers could be realized at a linguistic level in
actual texts. By ranking the different introductions in terms of their effectiveness for different groups of readers
this task helps to illustrate the interdependence of written texts and social contexts.

Read the sample introductions for persuasive essays provided by your teacher and complete the following
activities.
1. Decide which of the following types of introductions are used for 1-3. (Some introductions may use more
   than one type).
   ● A Historical Introduction
   ● A Personal Anecdote (story)
   ● An Interesting/surprising fact or statistic

2. Decide which introductions you think would be most and least effective for each of the audiences listed
   below. Rank the paragraphs from 1 (most impressive) to 3 (least impressive) for each of the audiences below.
   ● Other students in the class
   ● Other students your age who live in rural areas of Japan
   ● Foreign students your age who have never been to Japan
   ● Your teacher
   ● You

Excerpt 1. Some sample task introductions for analyzing persuasive essay introductions.
The following [3] is an example of an introduction that could be provided by the teacher for students to complete the genre analysis activities described in Excerpt 1.

[3] When my family first moved to Tokyo from Aomori, I was very sad to leave my friends and nervous about starting my new life in Tokyo. Before I came to Tokyo, I heard so many things about it on the news and in movies. It seemed to be a very dangerous place. All my friends in Aomori were worried about me and told me to be careful. The first time I went to Shinjuku, I got lost looking for a book store, so I went to a small police station and a police officer had to help me to find my way. But since that time I have made many new friends in Tokyo and I really enjoy my life here. There are so many interesting things to see and do in Tokyo.

Students will likely identify this text as a clear example of the personal anecdote introduction type. It could also be considered a suitable introduction for most of the audiences outlined in the activity described in Excerpt 1. For example, the teacher and students in the class may find it interesting to learn more about the feelings and experiences of someone they know. Students may also decide that this introduction is particularly suitable for an audience of students from rural areas of Japan, since it tells the story of a young person coming to Tokyo for the first time. It also seems to address concerns about personal safety that a young person might have when coming to such a big city from a rural area. However, on a closer analysis, students may decide that the introduction is not very well suited to foreign students who have never been to Japan. People who are not familiar with the geography of Japan may not know that Aomori is a somewhat sparsely populated area in northern Honshu or that Shinjuku is a densely populated area in the center of Tokyo. This analysis activity could be further extended by teaching students how nominal adjuncts can be used to provide further information about nouns (e.g., ...Shinjuku, a densely populated area in the center of Tokyo, ...). Students could then rewrite the introduction so that it is more suitable for an audience of foreign peers.

An analysis of the following sample paragraph [4] will likely elicit very different opinions from students about its rhetorical effectiveness for the different audiences described in Excerpt 1.

[4] Since the Meiji Restoration in 1894, Japan has undergone rapid modernization. During this time, Japan’s population grew considerably, and modern factories and buildings appeared all over Japan. Nowadays, it can be difficult to find traditional buildings and unspoiled nature in many areas of Japan. One area however that still has much nature as well as beautiful old buildings is Kyoto. I would highly recommend that people take some time to visit Kyoto when they are in Japan.

While this introduction could be classified as historical, it actually contains very little information that most
people living in Japan, including the teacher and students in the class, would not already know. Kyoto is of course one of the most well-known tourist destinations in Japan, so an introduction, or an essay, that foregrounds such common knowledge about Kyoto would likely be unnecessary for most readers who live in Japan. However, the introduction may be considered well suited to the audience of foreign students who have never been to Japan and therefore may know very little about Kyoto and modern Japanese history.

Sample persuasive essay activity 3 : Analyzing hedging techniques

English is often described as far more direct than Japanese. Not only is this claim highly debatable, but when told to our students it can lead to a very misleading view of English as an argumentative language of bare, categorical assertions that can be put forward without regard to the beliefs and values of potential respondents. All languages make use of interpersonal strategies “to construct relations of alignment and rapport” (Martin & White, 2005, p.2) between writers/speakers and real or imagined audiences. English academic discourse is no different. In fact, bare statements in which there is no explicit recognition of other voices that may hold contrary views are very rare in academic writing (Hyland, 2004; Vassileva, 2001). One strategy that writers (and speakers) often employ to mitigate the strength of their claims and allow a rhetorical space for other competing voices is often referred to in the literature as hedging (e.g., Hyland, 1998). According to Hyland (1998), “hedging is the expression of tentativeness and possibility and it is central to academic writing where the need to present unproven propositions with caution and precision is essential” (p.433). This strategy involves the use of various grammatical forms including:

adverbials:
It is generally agreed that....

determiners
Many people agree that...

auxiliary modals
The results could show...

The following sample supporting paragraph [5] from a persuasive essay about visiting Tokyo contains a number of hedges (underlined).

[5] First of all, you can see a lot of traditional Japanese architecture in Tokyo. When most people think of Japanese culture, places like Kyoto will likely come to mind. However, Tokyo also has some beautiful old
temples and shrines. For example, the Senso-ji in Asakusa is a magnificent, old temple with a very long history. Walking around some areas of Tokyo can make you feel like you have time-travelled to another century.

Students could be directed to highlight or underline all the hedges in this and other sample texts. Class discussions could focus on not only the grammatical form of these devices, but also how they function rhetorically to “make allowances for and hence to make space for alternative voices and value positions” (Martin & White, 2005, p.108). For example, the determiner “some” in the sentence Tokyo also has some beautiful old temples... functions not just to limit the places the author is referring to, but to actually anticipate possible objections from readers who may view Tokyo as just a bustling, modern metropolis. For additional study, students could be encouraged to keep a notebook to record the various hedges and other useful language they come across in sample texts.

Sample persuasive essay activity 4 : Analyzing concessions

Another common discourse feature of academic writing is the concession (Thompson & Zhou, 2000). Like hedging, concessions function to construe a reader who might be resistant to the propositions being put forward in the text. Martin and White (2005) also refer to this rhetorical strategy as concur/counter for the way in which “argumentative ground is given up (the initial concurring concession) only for that ground to be re-taken in the subsequent counter move” (p.124). In [5], the text temporarily aligns itself with a reading community that does not associate Tokyo with traditional Japanese architecture by concurring that when most people think of Japanese culture, places like Kyoto will likely come to mind. But in the following sentence, the writer closes down this rhetorical space with the claim that Tokyo also has some beautiful old temples and shrines.

After identifying concessions in sample texts, students could be asked to speculate about the author’s reasons for using this device and the different reading positions that are construed. When actually writing their own essays, students could be asked to consider possible areas of disagreement that other readers might have to their arguments and then write appropriate concessions to address these possible objections. Such activities will undoubtedly be quite challenging for novice writers, but if students are provided with a clear audience and purpose for the writing task, it may be easier to conceptualize the objections their audience may raise.

Suggestions for implementing genre analysis activities

Using genre analysis activities in the classroom requires careful planning and much preparation. The following is a summary of some of the considerations that could be made when developing these activities.

1. Whenever possible, genre analysis exercises should focus on how linguistic resources are used to achieve
socio-rhetorical goals.

2. A variety of sample texts should be used to highlight different rhetorical options available to writers.

3. Sample texts should be written at a level appropriate to learners. The analysis of sample texts is most effective when learners are not “bogged-down” with too much unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures.

4. Whenever possible, sample texts written by peers should be used instead of, or in addition to, those written by teacher(s). When there are no available sample texts from students, teachers may consider seeking the assistance of other teachers in their program to write them. This will help ensure that there is a range of language used in the texts and provides an opportunity for collaboration among teachers.

5. Students should be encouraged to keep a notebook to collect the lexico-grammatical resources that they consider useful when analyzing sample texts.

6. Though teachers should encourage learners to draw on the resources available to them in the sample texts, they should be discouraged from over-relying on a single model. One possibility for avoiding this is to provide models that make use of the same types of rhetorical resources as the task at hand, but address a different topic.

7. Teachers may also consider providing “deliberate-false provisions” or sample texts that for various reasons may not effectively achieve rhetorical goals. This may help to develop a more critical sense among writers of the types of resources available and reasons why they may or may not be effective in particular rhetorical situations (Macbeth, 2010).

This list is of course not intended to be exhaustive. Different teaching contexts will present unique challenges and will require creative solutions.

**Conclusion**

This article looked at specific ways genre analysis activities could be used with novice writers when teaching common academic writing assignments like the short persuasive essay and the academic summary. An emphasis throughout the article was on teaching these writing tasks in such a way that learners gain a deeper appreciation of the social dimension of academic writing, while not being overwhelmed with the complexities of written genres.

The article also offered some practical suggestions for implementing these activities with novice writers. It is worth pointing out however that it is not necessary for every writing assignment to address the social considerations of audience as explicitly as the sample activities described here. For many academic writing assignments, students will be given little information about the audience and task purpose. The reader will be assumed to be a teacher or a kind of abstract, general academic reader constructed by the teacher. The sample activities described here simply aim to raise awareness among writers of the dynamic relationship between academic texts...
and social contexts. It is hoped that developing this awareness will contribute to the rhetorical flexibility necessary to address different writing goals across various contexts. Promoting this flexibility could be a step toward actually educating students to “to cope with an almost uncertain future” (Johns, 2008, p.239) rather than training them to complete static pedagogical exercises.

References


L 2 初級ライターへのジャンル分析：
導入のためのアクティビティー例と提案

ゴードン・ミスコウ*

この論文は、心を引き付ける短い文章やアカデミックサマリーなどの一般的なアカデミックライティングの課題を教える際に使える、初級のライターへのジャンル分析の様々なアクティビティについて説明する。論文は特に、学ぶ者が、アカデミックライティングにおける社会的側面へのさらなる理解を深められるように作られたアクティビティの分析に焦点を置くが、それと同時にライティングのジャンルの複雑さに圧倒されないようにする。また、初級ライターへの、ジャンル分析アクティビティーの導入のための数々の実践的提案についても述べる。
キーワード：ジャンル分析、アカデミックライティング、高等教育、初心者のライター

* 人間科学総合研究所研究員・東洋大学経済学部