

TEXT TYPES, TEXTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ACADEMIC WRITING ABILITY

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Abstract. The Department of English, Gothenburg University, has for over a decade offered an introductory writing course for about 150 first-term students. Due to budget restraints and availability of teachers, the department has found it possible to offer only four workshops (of three hours each) per term for all students at the same time in a lecture hall. In addition, the students have typically been divided into groups of about 25 for eight classroom hours spread over the whole term. A distinction has been made between text types and genres. The first part of the course has focused on three basic expository text types, causal analysis, problem solving and argumentation. Students have studied model texts in order to strengthen their meta-cognitive basis and produce their own texts within a process-oriented model. At the end of the term, students have also written a genre – *i.e.*, discipline-specific – paper in literary studies. The article describes the course and discusses the rationale for the focus on text types in an introductory academic writing course.

Keywords: Causal-analysis text type, Genre competence, Process-oriented writing instruction, Textual competence, Text-type competence, and Text types vs. genres.

1 BACKGROUND

The vast majority of Swedish first-term university students have not, or they claim they have not, received any help in secondary school to analyse or practise expository or discursive writing. For whatever reason, my experience over the past couple of decades tells me that the writing ability of most Swedish students entering university is inadequate. And, if I understand the signals from friends and colleagues abroad correctly, this is not an unknown phenomenon in the rest of Europe. In this context, an article in the German newspaper ‘Die Welt’ is worth mentioning. In the article entitled, freely translated, ‘The Organisation of Thinking by Writing’ the author maintains that ‘according to assessment by experts, half the university drop-out rate in Germany is due to inadequate writing ability.’

If university students in other European countries have had similar experiences, it is not surprising that there is an increasing understanding of the importance of writing support in higher education in Europe, an understanding testified to by a number of European conferences and publications in recent years. The present article draws on insights from these as well as US sources but primarily on my own experience of one particular writing course that I have been involved in teaching in the English department at Gothenburg University for well over a decade. It is part of the first-term syllabus, where it competes for teaching resources with other courses considered crucial to foreign language study, such as phonetics, grammar, language proficiency and culture studies.

Although modest in terms of teaching hours, the composition course has ambitious aims. The immediate and obvious ones are (a) to prepare students for writing in the field of English studies, and (b) to help students improve their English language proficiency. However, since English is a subject that many students (about 50%) study for one term only before going on to other disciplines, the composition course also tries to offer writing instruction that can serve as a useful basis for writing across disciplines. The first part of the course therefore focuses on non-discipline-specific writing, and it is this aspect of the course that is the focus of the present article.

2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the context of our students' inadequate writing ability and the fact that most of them will pursue professional careers not related to the discipline-specific writing of English literature or language, the hypothesis behind the course was that a useful first step for the students to improve their general language awareness was to clarify the distinction between *text types* on the one hand and *genres* on the other. These terms are sometimes used as synonyms, but I am here making an important distinction between them, as can be seen in the following overview (table 1).

Briefly, *text type* is a general, inter-disciplinary typology whose main principle of categorization is located in the *overriding communicative purpose* of texts. For instance, if that purpose is to explain the causes of something, the text is an example of the causal-analysis text type; if the overriding purpose is to solve a problem, the text belongs to the problem-solving text type, and so forth. I emphasise *overriding* purpose since of course text types are usually mixed in any one concrete text. Thus, for instance, there are descriptive and narrative passages in a causal-analysis text, but they only serve the overriding causal-analysis purpose, and it is that overriding purpose that is the criterion for the text's text-type categorisation. Text-type criteria are text-internal criteria, derived from the text proper. It is important to note that text types are not discipline specific: they cut across disciplines, across university subjects and departments.

Table 1. Distinction between text types and genres.

<i>Expository/Discursive Text Types</i>	<i>Expository/Discursive Genres</i>
<i>Causal Analysis</i> (to analyse the causes of something)	<i>Academic papers/articles/books</i> in psychology, linguistics, literature, philosophy, physics, architecture, mathematics <i>etc.</i>
<i>Problem Solving</i> (to identify a problem and to propose solutions to the problem)	
<i>Argumentation</i> (argumentation for and against; to take a position on an issue)	

Genres on the other hand are defined by socio-cultural criteria, *i.e.*, by text-external criteria. That is, the criteria are determined from outside the text: '...the characteristics of a specific genre are defined by the conventions agreed upon by the writing communities within which each genre is used.' (Björk & Räisänen 1997:19). This is why, for instance, an academic paper in physics is very different from a paper in history, linguistics or literature. This means that genres are discipline and/or subject specific.³

Depending on our perspective, it is possible to see text types both as smaller and as larger entities than genres. In a strictly theoretical sense, text types coincide with basic language functions and are thus larger concepts than genres. As Seymour Chatman writes, 'By 'text-types' (...) I mean something other than genres (...) Text-types are underlying (or overriding) structures that can be actualised by different surface forms.' (Chatman 1990:10-11).

If we leave the strictly theoretical sense, however, it may in practical pedagogical contexts be helpful to see a genre as the superior concept. If, for instance, we look at a newspaper article as a genre it is easy to see how one part of it may be narrative, another descriptive, and a third section argumentative. Thus, the individual article makes use of various text types. In such a context, we might say that the text types are the *building blocks* of the article, of the genre.

In brief, the distinction between text types and genres is the basis for the two parts of the introductory writing course here described, with text types being the focus of the first and somewhat larger part, and genres of the second part. The underlying assumption, then, is that a key aim of a general, introductory writing course

³ Rienecker and Jörgensen (see this volume) present a compelling alternative: they posit the theoretical construct of 'the research paper' as a general super ordinate genre, which includes characteristics from different disciplines, and they argue that this genre should be the focus of introductory writing courses.

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