

Chapter One

What's Academic? What's "Alternative"?

Whenever we feel that we have achieved some certainty about standards that our colleagues across the curriculum will apply, we receive a fresh surprise. Recently, for example, we co-led a workshop on assessment standards for student writing for faculty representatives from many departments, who would then go back to lead similar workshops for their own departments. As material for the assessment session, we had selected for review four sample student papers, each from different majors but all written in response to a "review of the research" assignment. In building this sample, we made our own preliminary judgments of the relative quality of the papers. We chose papers that seemed to us to represent a clear range from poor to excellent. The "poor" paper, in our view, lacked organization, was short on evidence to support its thesis, and was marred in its effectiveness by errors in Standard Edited American English (SEAE) syntax and punctuation. The best paper, in our view, had a strong thesis, argued it with evidence from reliable sources, was clearly organized, and used SEAE with no errors. When we conducted the cross-curricular session, we kept our preliminary judgments to ourselves, since the object of the session was to help faculty establish their own judgments, not to have them replicate our views. To our surprise, the "poor" paper was judged by a plurality of the participants to be the best in the sample—because they regarded it as having the "freshest voice" and "taking the most risk" in its approach to the research—while they downgraded the "excellent" (in our view) paper as "conventional, saying nothing new even though competently written." Where we had expected this mixed group of business, science, social science, and humanities faculty to prioritize formal and logical properties usually invoked as defining academic prose, many of them had prioritized a

creative, personal criterion almost never named in lists of academic writing conventions.

This incident occurred while we were in the midst of *one* phase of the research for this book; that is, interviewing a variety of faculty on perceived standards and alternatives for academic writing in their disciplines. The incident, as it defied a stereotype, reinforced for us the value of our investigation for fellow scholars and its potential usefulness for teachers and program developers. Still, we did not realize the degree of interest in our subject by other teachers and program developers until our first presentation of this research at a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) convention. Our session on this research, which we'd written about for the collection *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*, drew a standing-room-only audience. It was gratifying to know that others considered the questions we were asking as important as we did. But what, we wondered, accounted for the increased interest we were seeing in this topic, as evidenced by other filled-room sessions on alternative discourses?

What compelled us, certainly, was our sense that many people in our field realize that "academic writing" is not as stable, unified, and resistant to alternatives as we often theorize it to be, and that they wish to learn more about the complexity of what we call "academic writing." Yet we also know that many others in composition and rhetoric do perceive academic writing as unnecessarily narrow and are interested in alternatives as ways to acknowledge and honor diverse voices. What these two groups have in common is their concern for student writers, for giving them an accurate sense of what they need to know in order to succeed as writers in school and the broader community: writers who can meet others' expectations and also articulately express their individual and communal identities, desires, and understandings. A more precise understanding of these complex terms—"academic writing" and "alternative discourse"—is important because thousands of teachers across the country are responsible for giving accurate and helpful guidance to students; they are also responsible for evaluating student writers to determine whether they meet certain literacy "standards." We will give elaborated definitions of "academic writing" and "alternatives" to it later in this chapter. The research we have undertaken for this book uncovers perceptions—through interviews with faculty and student informants—about characteristics of academic writing and what might constitute alternatives—both acceptable and unacceptable. Based on our research findings, which we report in Chapters Two through Four, we make recommendations for teacher practice, course design, and faculty and program development.

Our Research Plan: Aims and Methods

As part of our teaching and scholarship, each of us has been interested over the years in the meaning and uses of alternative rhetorics, as these have appeared in arguments advocating students' right to their own texts, feminist arguments for the need to disrupt patriarchal texts, linguistic cultural analyses of contrastive rhetorics, and critical pedagogy and cultural studies arguments for alternative discourses as a way to challenge cultural hegemonies. Our research plan was driven by these interests, as well as by our many years of research and experience in writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID) program development and teaching, which have led us to question some assumptions of the scholarship on alternative rhetorics, as well as assumptions often made about academic writing. We therefore wanted to shape and pursue a study that would help us further understand (1) the nature of academic writing, as it is perceived by academic professionals across disciplines, and (2) the attitudes of these professionals toward what might be called "alternatives" to that writing. As we reflected, we became particularly curious about how these definitions of "academic" and "alternative" had been developed through our potential informants' own writing careers. How had they developed their ideas of what was "standard" in their fields? Had they in their growth felt pulled in other directions, toward alternatives from the standard, and, if so, how had they worked with those conflicting desires? Finally, how had their own histories as writers influenced their teaching of students, particularly in how they assigned and responded to student prose?

In addition to our projected work with faculty across disciplines, we also wanted to hear from students—undergraduate majors from a variety of fields. Would their responses, in surveys, focus groups, and proficiency exams, in relation to the same issues reveal similar perceptions to those of faculty? How well could these undergraduates talk about the "standards" and "conventions" of writing in their majors? What could they reveal to us about tensions between their goals and desires as writers and what their professors expected of them? Did they perceive that their professors were as accepting of—or resistant to—alternatives as the faculty informants said they were? We hoped that by finding answers to these and similar questions we could reach conclusions that would enrich our teaching, our program administration, and our work in faculty development.

A third major source of data emerged from the assessment workshops that we alluded to in the opening incident. These workshops are part of a state-mandated assessment of student writing competency in higher education; they have allowed us to extend our investigation of faculty perceptions of criteria for successful academic writing in disciplines.

We believe that these varied sources of data, described in detail later in this chapter, give us a rich view of faculty and student attitudes toward and practices around academic writing, a view that offers what we see as a more balanced, contextual, dynamic view of academic discourse.

What Is Academic Writing? What Are Its Standards?

“Academic writing” is one of those terms that is often invoked, usually solemnly, as if everyone agreed on its meaning, and so is used imprecisely yet almost always for what the user regards as a precise purpose; e.g., commonly by teachers in explaining what they want from students. For our purposes as researchers, we’ll define “academic writing” broadly as any writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university in the United States. For most teachers, the term implies student writing in response to an academic assignment, or professional writing that trained “academics”—teachers and researchers—do for publications read and conferences attended by other academics. In this second sense, “academic writing” may be related to other kinds of writing that educated people do, such as “writing for the workplace,” but there are many kinds of workplace writing that would rarely be considered “academic”; indeed, as the research by Dias et al indicates, the distinctions in audience and purpose between academic writing by students and writing for the workplace greatly outweigh any perceived similarities. The distinction is important, because the teacher who is assigned to prepare students for the kinds of assignments they’re likely to receive in other classes should distinguish between the characteristics of truly academic writing and characteristics of writing in other venues.

Most textbooks used in introductory composition classes either attempt to define or imply a definition of academic writing, but most of these definitions are abstract and are not based in research. These writers may or may not consider differences in standards and expectations among disciplines and among teachers. Some texts do attempt the somewhat easier—but still problematic—task of defining standards and characteristics of writing in particular “disciplines” or groups of disciplines, e.g., writing in the “social sciences,” but these do not bring us closer to a workable definition of academic writing as a whole.

Further, scholarly writers with an interest in “alternatives” to supposed standards and conventions in academic writing will invoke it in various ways, thereby assuming a definition. A few of these writers have attempted explicit definitions—for example, Patricia Bizzell in her introductory essay in *ALT DIS*. As opposed to a careful statement such as Bizzell’s, most of what a student is likely to receive about academic writing, especially in the informal atmosphere of the classroom, relies too much on a teacher’s limited personal experience of

particular classrooms or on commonplaces that have been passed down. For example, one common assertion about academic prose—"It avoids the use of the first person"—continues to be made in classroom after classroom, even though many teachers across disciplines routinely accept first-person writing, and journals in every field accept articles with more or less use of the first person.

There are exceptions to almost every principle an analyst can identify as a characteristic of academic writing. So what can we say with confidence about its characteristics, regardless of differences among disciplines and individual teachers? Our reading, observation, and research suggest the following:

1. *Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.*

The concept of the discipline—and of "discipline" without the "the"—is central to the university, because academics have learned so much respect for the difficulty of learning anything sufficiently deeply so that "new knowledge" can be contributed. What the academy hates is the dilettante, the person who flits whimsically from subject to subject, as momentary interests occupy him or her, and who assumes the qualifications—merely because of that interest—to pronounce on that subject of the moment. Whether they are reading student papers or evaluating journal articles, academics are invariably harsh toward any student or scholar who hasn't done the background reading, who isn't prepared to talk formally or off the cuff about the subject of the writing, and whose writing doesn't show careful attention to the objects of study and reflective thought about them. Of course, standards for fellow professionals and for introductory students differ monumentally, but even the most neophyte student will be penalized for shallow reading and for lack of careful thinking about the subject. Persistent, disciplined study can be shown as well in a personal narrative as in a lab report, so this first characteristic of academic writing is not restricted in style or voice, although disciplines and subfields of disciplines do vary in customary ways of thought and in traditional modes of expression. We'll address in more detail later in this chapter the concept of "the discipline" and will describe disciplinary variations in subsequent chapters when we report the responses of our informants.

2. *The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.*

"And I wonder anew at a discipline that asks its participants to dedicate their lives to its expansion, but that requires a kind of imperial objectivity, a gaze that sees but rarely feels"

Malea Powell, "Listening to Ghosts" (16)

In the Western academic tradition, the writer is an intellectual, a thinker, a user of reason. This identity doesn't mean that emotions or sensual stimuli are absent from academic writing: indeed, the natural sciences have always depended on acute sensate awareness, detection of subtle differences in appearance, fragrance, flavor, texture, sound, movement; moreover, the arts and humanities would not exist without the scholar's intense and highly articulated sensual appreciation. As for emotion, every discipline recognizes at the very least the importance of *passion* in the ability to dedicate oneself to research, acknowledged as often tedious. But in the academic universe the senses and emotions must always be subject to *control by reason*. Political thinkers, for example, may be motivated by their passion for a system of government, even by their anger at opponents, but the discipline of political science demands, as do all disciplines, that *writing* about these issues reveals the writer as a careful, fair student and analyst of competing positions. The sociologist may describe in passionate detail personal experience of poverty or family dislocation, but the *academic* writer must not stop with the appeal to emotion (what Aristotle called *pathos*); the responsible sociologist must step back, as it were, almost as if he or she were a separate person, and place that emotional, highly sensual experience in a *context* of the relevant experiences of others and of the history of academic analysis of the topic. The literary or art historian, to cite one more example, might write about, and describe in great sensual detail, work that was intended by its creators to be pornographic, but the academic writer must be able both to appreciate the sensual power of the work and step back from the sensations to evaluate the work rationally.

With students, perhaps the most common instruction by teachers in regard to the control by reason of emotion is to avoid "impressionism": merely expressing "feelings" or opinions. The various formulations of the principles of the "personal essay" (e.g., Newkirk, Heilker), a popular assignment in composition classes, all countenance the telling of "personal experience" narratives that include the expression of emotion, but all demand of the writer an analytical persona that reflects on and evaluates the narrative in some way. The "discipline" of which we speak is largely this ongoing process by which scholars learn through practice to cultivate both emotion and the senses and, necessarily, to subjugate them to reason. It's not coincidental that "discipline" has been associated so often in education with, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, "mortification of the flesh," the scourging of the body that is an extreme form of the subjugation of the senses to reason that is basic to all academic discipline.

3. *An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.*

The academic writer may wish also to arouse the emotions to agreement or to sympathy, as well as to stimulate the senses to an enhanced perception, but the academic writer wants above all to inspire the intelligent reader's respect for his or her analytical ability. The writer imagines the reader looking for possible flaws in logic or interpretation, for possible gaps in research and observation, and so tries to anticipate the cool reader's objections and address them. When an analyst such as Bizzell, in the essay mentioned earlier, calls the writer's "persona" "argumentative, favoring debate," we should understand "argument" not as an explicit form; after all, there is much academic writing that appears benignly descriptive, not "argumentative" in the formal sense. But all academic writing is "argumentative" in its perception of a reader who may object or disagree—e.g., the teacher who may take off "points" or the fellow scholar who may sit on a review panel; the writer's effort to anticipate and allay these potential objections is also part of the broadly "argumentative" ethos.

While the three "standards" we have described for academic writing might appear simple, they are devilishly hard to teach and even to observe in any given piece of writing. Would that the standards were as straightforward as "avoid the first person" or "use correct English" or "have a clear thesis." As our findings chapters will describe in detail, our informants tended to speak vaguely about what they regarded as "standards" and "conventions" in their fields, even though none of them had any hesitancy to say that they knew what the standards were. What their stories imply to us is that their knowledge of standards accrued over time, through coursework, reading, attempts to write and reactions to that writing; through regular talk with fellow students and fellow researchers and teachers. It's no wonder, given this gradual trajectory of initiation, that newcomers to academia, such as undergraduate students, often feel that teachers' reactions to their writing are mysterious, perhaps motivated by social and personality differences, rather than by factors clearly attributable to academic quality. (One of our student findings, as we'll describe in Chapter Four, is their perception of teacher standards as idiosyncratic and unpredictable.) But, as we will discuss in the next section, perceptions of academic quality often have a great deal to do with social—and cultural—differences among writers and their readers, not only with actual analytical and rhetorical control of a person's writing. In the next section, we make a distinction between an alternative text that is acceptable to academic readers and one that is unacceptable

unless or until it is somehow revised through negotiation between writer and teacher.

What Constitutes an Alternative to Academic Writing?

We suggested three features we can confidently say characterize academic writing: disciplined and persistent inquiry, control of sensation and emotion by reason, and an imagined reader who is likewise rational and informed. Can the same confident assertions be made about the characteristics of alternatives to academic writing? Here, we think, we're on much more slippery ground, as the following anecdote from one of our informants illustrates. "My goodness, aren't I daring," anthropology professor Roger Lancaster told us he remembered thinking when he had finished writing *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. The book is comprised of journalistic and impressionistic passages, raw field notes, chapter-length interviews, life histories, newspaper articles, and letters. In the book he also discloses his sexual orientation and describes his partnership with a military man opposing the Sandinistas: he questions whether his research will be compromised by this relationship. The collage-like quality of the book and the self-disclosure were both very different—"daring"—approaches for him; he felt he had created a truly alternative text. Yet, when he reread the book a year or so later, he recalled this reaction: "Oh my god, it's a standard ethnography." For us, Lancaster's shifting perceptions about his work illustrate the difficulties of talking about alternatives and academic writing. When academics talk about writing alternatively, often they mean they are including what has previously been excluded—voices, structures, styles, formats, genres, personal information. Still, they are writing for other academics, in an academic forum, and, if they are being published and read, are no doubt displaying the features we described above.

Though he was experimenting with new forms and with—what might be considered by some—risky self-disclosure, Lancaster's book certainly demonstrated these features. The variety of material he includes both broadens and deepens a reader's understanding of the culture. His disclosure that he is homosexual occurs in the context of his work in the field and in his analysis of the larger issues around homosexuality in Nicaragua. When he first perceived his work as "daring," he may have been most uncertain about how his imagined readers—anthropologists—would respond. Yet anthropology's tradition of stylistic experimentation—from Malinowski on—no doubt reassured Lancaster that his "daring" work would still provoke a reasoned response from academic readers, who had already been constructed by the discipline as readers who readily accepted "alternative" texts as long as those

texts were still performing disciplined academic work. The fact that his book is now required reading in some introductory anthropology courses seems to confirm Lancaster's changed perception of the book as "standard" ethnography, not particularly alternative in this discipline.

Just as arguments and advice about "academic writing" are often based on assumed meanings, so too are arguments about "alternative" discourses. In these arguments, certain kinds of texts (and voices) are labeled "alternative" because they do not conform to some analysts' expectations for standard academic writing. Because they do not conform, the argument proceeds, they are marginalized and/or go unheard. But, as the example of Lancaster's book illustrates, an alternative text may be widely accepted if the writer conveys to the reader a conscious awareness that he or she is constructing a different kind of text and if the reason for using an alternative form is clear. Lancaster, for example, described to us the "organic relationship" between a text and its writer; he needed an alternative form, he said, "to mirror the discombobulation of a failed revolution." As we will show in our research, professional academics often find that alternative forms and methodologies can perform rigorous and disciplined inquiry at the same time that they may uncover knowledge not available through more traditional discourses.

An "alternative" may also be employed for political purposes in order to call attention to those voices that have historically been marginalized or silenced by dominant discourses, as, most notably, feminist and African American scholars have done. In her essay "Recomposing as a Woman—An Essay in Different Voices," for example, Terry joined a conversation among feminists that had been in progress for a number of years, as the title indicates in its echo of two landmark publications; that is, if women do think, write, and speak in voices different from men, then their different voices should be as valued as the patriarchal voices that had been dominating academic discourse. Terry purposely claimed a marginalized space by using an alternative style and format to suggest what a "woman's voice" might sound like if she wrote according to the characteristics being theorized by "difference" feminists. While the essay was intended to show that genre and gender are both socially constructed categories, Terry also argued that women should not have to speak from the margins of their discipline if they happen to write in ways not generally recognized by disciplinary insiders. Her readers—other academics—are expected not only to follow the logic of the argument but also to see that it is possible to reason in this alternative form.

But what about those writers, typically our student writers, who are not aware that the texts they are producing are linguistically and/or culturally quite different from traditional academic writing? Take, for example, a paper, written by one of our students, a young man from Sierra Leone. The student

spends the first half of his paper, the topic of which is the political turmoil in his country, describing the beauty of the country and its people. There is no introduction and no thesis related to the ostensible topic; he instead conveys in heartbreaking detail his longing for the land he'd left behind. It is not until well into the third page of an eight-page paper that he begins, with no transition, to describe the strife in neighboring countries. Around page 7, he mentions—almost casually—that this strife endangered his own country. Then he returns to a description of the country and concludes the paper. While this student seems to be unaware that he is writing from a different cultural paradigm, one that values indirection and subtle implication, he may also have had good reason to fear writing in a more direct style. In other words, he may have been quite conscious of constructing an alternative text for the readers he is imagining, readers who may be very different from the “coolly rational” academic readers Terry imagines in her essay.

How will an academic reader—say, a professor in the student's major—receive the Sierra Leone essay? In *Listening to the World*, Helen Fox is concerned with the misunderstandings and misreadings that occur when teachers are confronted with these kinds of culturally different texts. She, along with many others, argues that western academics reject these texts because of the radical disjunction between “the dominant communication style and world view of the U.S. university” (xxi) and that of the writer who produces a text which seems “obscure, or digressive, or overly descriptive, or disturbingly unoriginal” (126). These writers—especially since they are students—may be perceived to lack the discipline and control expected in standard academic writing in the western tradition and so the argument will be dismissed. Yet, interestingly, our political science informant told us she would not automatically reject the Sierra Leone paper nor ask the student to take out the descriptions of his country; rather, she would ask him to include a statement of purpose to help focus his intentions for the reader. Her response indicates a degree of openness to a nontraditional text, but, while she is accepting much of the student's work on its own terms, she is also demanding revisions that will make the text more familiar to traditional (western) academic readers. We cannot assume, then, that teachers will reject nontraditional forms as long as they can relatively easily be made to fit within the three principles we have identified.

While many readers/teachers may be open to culturally alternative texts, there's another kind of disjunction between a writer and reader that we haven't yet addressed, that is, the disjunction caused by texts that are what we might call “syntactically diverse.” It's often postulated that among the flaws the “coolly rational” academic reader will most strongly object to is “incorrect” usage of the grapholect (in this case, SEAE). Certainly composition programs

and standardized tests that place primary emphasis on syntactic and mechanical correctness illustrate this assumption about academic readers. Within our schema of standards in academic writing, this emphasis would fit as follows: the academic reader objects to flawed use of the grapholect as evidence of lack of control by reason, perhaps also evidence of superficial preparation and lack of attention to the published literature. This projected reader is embodied in the stereotyped professor (of which there are, of course, some outspoken examples) who loudly complains, "Why, they can't even use commas correctly!"

However, as our anecdote about the assessment workshop at the beginning of the chapter illustrates, it is easy to overestimate the importance to the academic reader of the student's adherence to syntactic and mechanical "correctness." In other words, academic readers may indeed accept in student writing some amount of error in use of the grapholect as an allowed alternative to academic prose. There are several reasons to believe that academic readers may be more tolerant of these kinds of "error" than the stereotype suggests. First, the scholarly community is increasingly international, and conscientious readers of all nations need to develop an ability to read across dialects and linguistic blendings. As one of our research informants, a mathematician, noted in reference to the international community of math scholars, the structure of articles in math is sufficiently uniform across the international community so that one can understand much of the argument in an article written in a language one doesn't understand. Because of (1) the customary sequence of sections and (2) the use of symbolic language, the content of the argument, or "proof," should be clear. Moreover, the growth of English as a *lingua franca* provides a different kind of example of acceptable diversity. As English continues to spread in international influence, there has developed a range of "Englishes" that differ in aspects of syntax, and certainly of lexicon. Each has its own "correct" features. The differences between the British and American grapholects are one instance of this divergence.

Second, as American schools have accommodated more and more students and faculty of diverse linguistic backgrounds, the variety of acceptable Englishes grows. In a highly linguistically diverse university such as ours, it would not be practical or productive to place primary and equal emphasis on all aspects of SEAE as a "standard" of academic writing (though one of our informants from economics insists on such a standard). The standards described above indicate that students must be sufficiently fluent in a language, regardless of dialect, to carry out the logical operations that show reasoned control; but some of the most common "errors" made, for example, by those who are learning SEAE—e.g., lack of agreement in number between subject and verb or idiomatic use of articles—often don't affect the logic of

sentences. The same is true of so-called “nonstandard” dialects of American English (e.g., Black English Vernacular).

In Chapters Two and Three, we will briefly return to this issue of “syntactic diversity” within academic writing, reporting what our faculty informants said about their expectations regarding student “correctness” and the results from our assessment workshops.

The foregoing discussion of various alternatives suggests a possible taxonomy of alternatives that can help writers/analysts speak more specifically about what they are seeing when they categorize a piece of writing as alternative to “standard” academic writing:

- *Alternative formats*, as exemplified in Lancaster’s *Life Is Hard*, with its use of journalism, field notes, interviews, letters, autobiographical detail, etc.; these may also include unconventional layouts and typography; shifting margins; overlapping text and text boxes; creative use of sentence and paragraph structure.
- *Alternative ways of conceptualizing and arranging academic arguments*, as exemplified by the paper written by the student from Sierra Leone.
- *Alternative syntaxes (language and dialect differences)*, which we have characterized as varying in their acceptance by academic readers.
- *Alternative methodologies*, which entail experimenting with methods and ways of thinking outside one’s disciplinary tradition.
- *Alternative media* (email, hypertext, blogs, digitized text and images, video), which we recognize as having the potential to change utterly the way “academic writing” gets written and read.

We recognize that these categories overlap and encompass each other in many complicated and interesting ways and also that other scholars might configure them differently depending upon their research interests and political agendas. If we try to categorize the literature on alternative discourse according to this taxonomy, for example, we can quickly see how many categories a particular piece of writing might fill depending upon the writers’ motives, the effects they want to achieve, and their sense of the stakes involved in writing alternatively.

Thus far in this chapter we’ve attempted to define “academic writing” as broadly as possible in order to suggest that the term is not so narrow as is often theorized in the literature. Similarly, we’ve explored a taxonomy of alternative models that given readers might or might not accept as legitimate options within their conceptions of “academic writing.” We and our informants have much more to say about these alternatives in the following chapters.

We have not included in our taxonomy of alternatives to academic writing thus far an alternative strategy that is almost never accepted as “academic writing”: when an academic chooses to write about his or her disciplinary specialty for a nonacademic audience. This alternative is definitely not academic writing because the decisions that writers make for the nonacademic reader typically run counter to the overt complexity and the impersonality demanded by the academy. While it is sometimes possible for a single work to appeal to both the academic and the popular audiences, the distinctions are often so basic that these occurrences are rare. In the next chapter on our faculty’s professional writing, we discuss informants who do this kind of writing even though they recognize that such work risks not being taken seriously; nevertheless, they consider it important for political advocacy and community education. Further, as we will discuss in Chapter Three, many of our informants, even those who do not do this kind of writing themselves, give undergraduates assignments that require them to connect what they are learning in the major with their own experiences and/or topics in the popular media and to write about these for audiences outside of the academy.

Disciplines, Genres, and Research on Alternative Discourses and the Academy

We can’t proceed to the description and analysis of our research findings without first defining other key terms and summarizing the research that has led us to our particular takes on them. Therefore, in this section, we probe the key concepts “discipline,” “genre,” and “alternative discourse.” By way of clarifying these terms, we look at three research areas—writing in the disciplines (WID), feminist theory and critical pedagogy, and contrastive rhetoric. Our review of work in these areas also illuminates the theoretical bases of our own study.

Discipline

We’ll begin with a discussion of the term “discipline,” which, in WID research, is most often used as synonymous with “such fluctuating administrative expediences” as “the departments” or “the majors” (Thaiss, “Theory” 314). Hence, most WID studies give names such as “history,” “chemical engineering,” and “landscape architecture” to the rhetorical setting for the research. As we will show, and as Chris and others have argued, disciplines are much more fluid and elusive than the programmatic names suggest. So too are academic genres, which arise from the shared aims of disciplinary discourse communities, but which also give rise to and shape those communities.

We find Stephen Toulmin's definition and discussion of disciplines in *Human Understanding* useful in understanding this fluidity and also why some disciplines seem more open and dynamic than others. Toulmin describes disciplines as "operative niches" (28) made up of sets of concepts, within which standards for rational thought are determined. A discipline, he states, can be summarized as follows:

A collective human enterprise takes the form of a rationally developing "discipline," in those cases where men's shared commitment to a sufficiently agreed set of ideals leads to the development of an isolable and self-defining repertory of procedures; and where those procedures are open to further modification, so as to deal with problems arising from the incomplete fulfillment of those disciplinary ideals. (359)

Depending upon the level of consensus about intellectual goals, Toulmin says, some disciplines might be called "compact," there being a high level of agreement about the processes of intellectual inquiry; others "diffuse" with concepts still evolving, and others "quasi," with unity and coherence preserved across ever changing techniques (396). Toulmin goes into much greater depth about the characteristics of disciplines, including those enterprises he calls "non-disciplinable" because it is not possible or desirable to "isolate certain classes of issues" for specialized study (405). In our work, however, we are most interested in his understanding of "compact" and "diffuse" disciplines, as we'll explain shortly.

Also useful to us is Toulmin's explanation of the role of factors beyond the discipline in influencing how a discipline is constructed as these pertain to the work our faculty informants are doing and their perceptions of disciplinary standards and expectations. Toulmin argues that, in addition to the activities that characterize a discipline, we must also look at the "ecological relationships" that govern the enterprise; that is, the wider interactions that affect how and why ideas, procedures, and techniques evolve (360–61). While disciplines may share fundamental concepts, methods, and aims, they are not immutable, he says. "Intellectual novelties" are always being introduced, and, given the conditions to prove their advantages, the degree to which they are taken seriously and integrated into disciplinary processes is "balanced against a process of critical selection," which considers not only the merits of the novelty but how well it meets the "specific 'demands' of the 'local intellectual environment.'" It is this critical selection process that accounts for the relative stability or transformation of disciplines (139–41).

What Toulmin's discussion of disciplines shows, we believe, is that research on academic writing practices and products should not be bound up in rigid conceptions of disciplines nor should disciplines be viewed as

synonymous with traditional departmental structures or majors. In our research, for example, when we asked informants to describe their disciplines and standard writing within that discipline, as we will discuss more fully in Chapter Two, they could easily name their discipline, but, depending upon the "compact," "diffuse," or "quasi" status of their discipline—to use Toulmin's terms—their responses either correlated or did not with the name of the department in which their discipline lodges. Similarly, their descriptions of the standard writing for their disciplines fell into a Toulmin-like continuum, with informants from diffuse or quasi disciplines using general terms like "logical arguments" while those from compact disciplines named generic templates like the experimental report as standards for the academic writing they produce and assign to their students.

Research on workplace writing, which is based on multiple contextual factors rather than on professional categories such as engineering or law (see, for example, Odell and Goswami; Bazerman *Shaping*; Dias, Freedman, Medway, Pare), can also be helpful in understanding the term "discipline," as Chris Thaiss suggests in "Theory in WAC: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?" (315). This is the opening move that Anson makes in his 1988 review of over 300 WAC/WID-focused studies, "Toward a Multidimensional Model of Writing in the Academic Disciplines," which begins the *Writing in the Academic Disciplines* collection, edited by David Jolliffe. The distinction "academic" and "nonacademic," on which much of our research relies, Anson argues, glosses over the social and organizational contexts that influence writers and writing practices. In both professional and academic communities, writers' goals, the characteristics of their texts, and their instructional practices¹ stem from a wide array of variables that makes strict identification of both genres and disciplines difficult, if not impossible. These variables

¹ Anson's review of studies of teacher attitudes and ideological positions related to their instructional practices correlates to our findings, as we explain in Chapter Three. According to Anson, these studies suggest that teachers work from tacit, generalized beliefs about the nature of academic writing, and that, while they may have thought about their own writing processes, they tend to hold "monolithic conceptions" of writing, reflecting "highly subjective elements as well as more objective, shared characteristics that define their field" (17). Similarly, the writing tasks teachers assign are influenced by their knowledge of the discipline, their curricular agendas, institutional mandates, sociopolitical movements, and their attitudes and responses to all the foregoing. The ways students understand and carry out these writing tasks are likewise influenced by a complex array of variables, including prior knowledge and experience, sociopolitical, cultural, and ideological views, beliefs about writing, and career goals (Anson 17–24). (For a very good overview of the research on students' acquisition of disciplinary conventions, see David Russell's "Where Do the Naturalistic Studies of WAC/WID Point? A Research Review.")

include, for example, writers' knowledge of the discipline, their political and institutional position within the discipline, and their attitudes towards their position, the institution, their colleagues, and their readers (7–10). Anson's "multidimensional model" is useful for explaining not only the "contextual relativity" of academic writing—what Toulmin calls the "ecological relationships"—that account for the stability or fluidity of disciplinary structures, but also its disciplinary forms or genres.

Genre

An ecological or contextual understanding of disciplines and disciplinary writing is integrally related to the concept of *genre* as "social action," the substances and forms—to use Carolyn Miller's words—that comprise academic discourse and, in turn, relay the shared values of the discourse community. As we will discuss, genre is yet another term that resists a fixed definition. While genres are described in many composition textbooks as static forms (such as "term paper" or "lab report" or "critical analysis") inscribing (and prescribing) the work of a discipline, most current literature understands genre as "social action," arising from social motives and contexts, but also shaping motives and contexts as they are reproduced by communities sharing common communicative purposes (Miller 1984; Swales; Bazerman 1988; Pare and Smart 1994; Devitt 2004²). Miller's "Genre as Social Action" has offered one of the most important formulations of this view. Miller argues that genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159). At the "core" of situation is "exigence," a "set of particular social patterns and expectations" that translate into motive and provide "a socially recognizable and interpretable way" to enact one's intentions (158). Motive, then, becomes "a conventionalized social purpose, or exigence, within the recurrent situation." It is for this reason, Miller says, that certain "recurring situations seem to 'invite' discourse of a particular type" (162). While a community establishes discourses so that individuals can "act together," discourses also shape the community by establishing that there are shared motives and naming what these might be. As Miller argues, when we learn genre, we are learning more

² In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt notes the "circularity" problem that arises when genre is equated with form: "A genre is named because of its formal markers; the formal markers can be identified because a genre has been named" (10). In Devitt's theory of genre, genre may be "visible in classification and form" but always exists as "a nexus between an individual's actions and a socially defined context" (31). She offers six principles to guide an analysis of genres in social settings, which attempt to capture the complexity of the work. There is not space to summarize them here (33–65).

than "a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have" (165).

An excellent example of how conflict in exigence produces very different conceptions of genre is presented in a study by David Russell and Arturo Yanez, who use activity theory in their analysis of writing in an introductory history course to explain why the teacher and the students may have differing conceptions of what constitutes successful writing. The students in the general education course were unwilling to produce the genres the "specialist teacher" had assigned; they were not interested in becoming historians so did not see why they should be asked to write what they perceived to be a history discourse. The history teacher, on the other hand, was unaware that he was working within a deeply embedded, highly professionalized "genre system"—history writing; rather he believed that his assignments would elicit generalized critical thinking practices that would serve the students well no matter what their course of study. (In an earlier article "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis," Russell lays out the potential of activity theory for understanding the dynamic and multilayered contexts around genre formation.)

A much broader application of genre as social action is that presented in the comparative studies of academic and workplace writing captured in *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts* by Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré. These writers hypothesize that the differences in motive between student and workplace writing are so basic as to invalidate the assumption that most academic writing is preparation for writing in the workplace. Student genres are characterized by two social motives: first, faculty intend for student assignments to be "epistemic," in that they should enable writers "to take on stances toward and interpretations of realities valorized in specific disciplines"; at the same time, this epistemic motive is constrained by the fact that students are being "sorted and ranked" according to their ability to produce these genres (44). Two very different exigencies, then, might motivate the same piece of writing. These academic motives, Dias et al argue, are nowhere present in the writing of workplace professionals, whose writing is motivated by practical needs of the organization and so is evaluated on its effects, not on its conformity to pre-established criteria.

Even as genres proliferate through differences in exigency, they are stabilized through the power of discourse communities, John Swales argues in *Genre Analysis*. Swales defines discourse communities as "sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards common sets of goals." Members of discourse communities can be characterized by their familiarity with the genres used to further those goals, by their ability to "process" the genres (encode

and decode), and their range of experience with appropriate processing tasks (9–10). “Genres belong to discourse communities, not to individuals,” Swales argues. While in his conception of genre, this point seems apparent, it is one Miller did not pursue in “Genre as Social Action” but now finds particularly persuasive when she returns to the topic in “Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre.” Though not as influential as her earlier essay, we include Miller’s reconsideration of genre and community because of its significance to discussions of alternative discourses.

Miller’s later essay, which appears in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, takes up the concerns of other contributors to that volume; that is, genres—because they are socially and culturally determined—must be “tied to an analysis of power” and taught as “culturally contingent” forms (x). Miller acknowledges that her original view of genre fails to take into account the powerful role of institutions in the reproduction of genres, the same concern expressed by those who theorize that alternative discourses can be used to resist these hegemonic discursive structures. Institutions are powerful, Miller says, because they systematically direct our individual memories and perceptions while hiding their influence. As individuals (actors), we rely on known structures to interpret the situations in which we find ourselves. In turn, institutions, though they do not have “minds of their own,” instantiate and reproduce these structures, meaning that we—the social actors—by our recurring actions, reproduce the structures of the institution (71). Though rhetorical communities may be structured by institutions, Miller argues in her conclusion, they are not to be characterized by “comfortable agreement or a dominating majority.” Rather, because they are made up of different members, they are “fundamentally heterogeneous and contentious” (74).

Yet, as Charles Bazerman points out in “From Cultural Criticism to Disciplinary Participation: Living with Powerful Words,” the fluidity of disciplines, disciplinary communities, and their representative genres does not mean that they are not also always responsive to “the powerful but nonetheless fluidly interpreted and reconstituted social facts of disciplinary institutionalization and control” (63). The many qualifications in Bazerman’s phrase imply the constant tension between definition and fluidity, the institution and its component groups, that makes it so difficult to determine at any moment just where power lies and to predict change.

Research on Alternative Discourses and the Academy

In our discussion so far, we’ve shown that academic genres, like disciplinary discourse communities and disciplines themselves, evolve and change in response to a complex range of variables, including the motives underlying

their production, the contexts in which they are produced, and the institutional and ideological agendas that help to shape both motive and context. As we've also discussed, however, institutional and ideological agendas are similarly responsive to competing social, cultural, political, and economic interests, albeit not without struggle. This brings us back to a question we think is central to discussions of alternative discourses and the academy: How does this dynamic of disciplines occur in practice? How does it affect how teachers teach and students learn?

In her preface to *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*, Bizzell tries to answer this question. She is optimistic about the potential for "hybrid forms" (a fraught term, she recognizes)—to the extent that they accomplish valued intellectual work—to blend with other discourses "to produce new forms with their own organic integrity" (ix). In another piece in the collection, however, Bizzell rethinks her optimistic position: "Valuable intellectual work for whom?" she asks. This is the hot-button political question that drives most conversations about alternative discourses and to which so many of the alternative voices are responding. In this section, we'll discuss responses to this question by those who have claimed various stakes in the debate (a debate that many date from the publication of "Students' Right to Their Own Language"). The complications, however, really begin with the meaning of the term "alternative discourse" itself. Not only, as we will show, is the meaning contested by those who have a significant stake in the debate by virtue of their scholarly identities and subject positions, but also by those, like us, whose work focuses on the multiplicities inherent in writing in the disciplines.

For us, as WID scholar-practitioners, one way to define "alternative" is in opposition to a standard discourse that is clearly recognized and articulated by participants in the discipline, a point we explore in our article "Questioning Alternative Discourses: Reports from Across the Disciplines." However, "alternative" can also be synonymous with "variant," merely different options without a clear sense of a dominant one. When we talk about alternative discourses, then, we need not be talking about oppositions or resistance. So, for example, those disciplines that in Toulmin's formulation are less "compact" would entertain many alternatives. To illustrate, one of our informants, who defines herself as a political scientist, stated that she could identify 40 branches of the field, each with its own journals and discursive and methodological expectations.

Moreover, alternative forms and styles, we suggested based on our research with faculty informants, often grow organically out of the research agenda scholars set and their sense of the best way to present the findings to the audience they envision. Among our informants were faculty who were confident that their disciplines would accommodate their interests and methods

although these were not necessarily in the mainstream as they saw it. Others, conversely, had a sense that the work they were doing or wanted to do would be resisted by those whom they considered more conventional. For example, an informant from nursing felt she was not able to explain the phenomenon of nurses' "intuition" using traditional quantitative methodology. Resistance to traditional methods and discourses, we argue, may not need to be overt or dramatic to help effect change, as we will discuss in Chapter Two in regard to faculty's definitions of writing "standards" in their fields.

There isn't room in this chapter to discuss all the important work that has been done on alternative discourses. Here we describe three general categories into which the literature can be organized along with a brief review of some of the better-known scholars/scholarship in each area.

The "Alternative" as Resistance to Stable Convention

As we have noted early in the chapter, these kinds of alternative discourses might be characterized by their use of autobiographical details, personal stories, unconventional syntaxes, and other unconventional ways of making arguments. Typically the writers are motivated by a need to make visible the identities and ways of knowing that, they argue, have been silenced by traditional academic discourses. Their texts argue that dominant discourses can be changed, or at least resisted, when different voices are allowed to speak and to be heard.³ As we also noted, among the most notable voices in this argument have been feminist and African-American scholars, whose activism emerged from the liberatory movements of the 1960s and '70s. They have since been joined in their concerns by those professing critical/cultural pedagogies and those interested in the study of contrastive rhetorics.

Feminist and Cultural Theory

In their early efforts to find common ground as women writing in the academy, many feminists argued that women share particularly feminine ways of knowing—whether biologically or socially constructed—and should not have to "write like men" in order to be heard in a patriarchal academy (see

³ An example of the recognition by a discipline of deliberately alternative work is provided by the February 1992 special issue of *College Composition and Communication—In Focus: Personal and Innovative Writing*—which was devoted to essays and articles that editor Richard Gebhardt hoped would help redefine "acceptable forms of academic publication" in composition studies (9). Gebhardt was responding to criticism of the journal for being "restrictive" in its editorial choices.

Elizabeth Flynn's "Composing as a Woman," for example). Gesa Kirsch pursued these ideas in *Women Writing the Academy*. Interviewing academic women from different disciplines and professional ranks, she concluded that disciplinary boundaries need to be "redefined" to make room for writers—both women and men—who want to write in nonmainstream or interdisciplinary forms (134). During this same period of time—the 1980s and early '90s—feminists in a range of disciplines were arguing for alternative research methodologies and ways of presenting their work (see Sandra Harding, Lorraine Code, and Patricia Williams, for example).⁴ Others experimented with presenting their arguments in a gendered style (see Tompkins; Zawacki "Recomposing"; and Bridwell-Bowles, for example).

It was difficult, however, for feminists to get around the "essentialist" problem, i.e., the assumption that women all write their gender in the same ways. In fact, disagreements appeared early on with many feminists making the case for argument (Lamb, Jarratt, Worsham) and other feminists—lesbians, women of color—claiming alternative textual orientations (Anzaldúa, hooks, Rich, Royster "A View"). By the mid-'90s, the focus for most feminists had shifted to an examination of the processes by which the subject position "woman" is constituted; this kind of analysis still entailed, for many, the inclusion of the first-hand accounts as a way to establish a politics of location (Brodkey "Writing on the Bias"; Lu "Reading and Writing Differences"; Zawacki "Telling"; Hindman; Fleckenstein; see also Kirsch and Ritchie for a discussion of the term "politics of location").

Writers and teachers of different races, ethnicities, and economic classes overlap with feminists in their arguments for the inclusion of the autobiographical as a way to locate themselves in relationship to dominant discourses. Whether purposely constructing alternative discourses from what they perceive to be the margins of a discipline or writing in a more conventional academic manner, they question the connection between identity and genre. Among composition scholars Mike Rose, Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard, Jackie Jones Royster, Barbara Mellix, Min-zhan Lu, and Malea Powell come most prominently to mind. In first-hand accounts, many of these writers describe their uneasy positions as outsiders who have had to negotiate the languages and ways of thinking in their home cultures with those of the academy. Often, as Gilyard's and Mellix's narratives vividly show, they have felt a profound sense of loss on their way to acquiring mainstream discourses. (For

⁴ These arguments continue to be persuasive to feminists. Witness the theme of the 2001 Third Biennial International Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference—"Feminist Literacies: Resisting Disciplines."

related discussions, see essays in *Negotiating Academic Literacies: Teaching and Learning Across Languages and Cultures*; *Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives*; and *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*.)

That disciplinary discourses are definable and entrenched and, furthermore, must be challenged, dismantled, or transformed is taken as a given in most of the feminist and cultural work on alternative discourses; indeed, several essays from this perspective explicitly criticize WID and WAC (writing across the curriculum) pedagogy for instantiating traditional, exclusionary disciplinary discourses. Victor Villanueva's essay in *WAC for the New Millennium*, for example, criticizes the "assimilationist" politics of WAC, which he sees as "more repressive than mere accommodation" (166). Donna LeCourt's frequently cited essay "WAC as Critical Pedagogy" also criticizes WAC for silencing alternative literacies and advocates resistance. Similar to LeCourt, Harriet Malinowitz, in "A Feminist Critique of Writing in the Disciplines," calls on WAC to join with other critical pedagogies (such as women's studies) to "dismantle existing systems of knowledge production" if it is serious about the claims made by many scholar-practitioners that WAC plays a subversive role in exposing assumptions about writing in the disciplines (293).

Contrastive Rhetorics and Alternative Syntaxes

The field of contrastive rhetoric originated out of the attempt to describe how different cultures conceived of the aims of discourse and created rhetorical structures to enact them. In recent years, some contrastive rhetoricians, emphasizing the relationship between culture and ways of thinking and writing, have taken up the argument of alternative as resistance. Unlike the alternatives we've been discussing, the differences that emerge in nonnative English speakers' writing are not purposely enacted. Rather they grow out of assumptions about what constitutes good writing in their home cultures. Often, in fact, their assumptions are at odds with the alternatives employed by those speaking out of race and gender positions. Writing about themselves, for example, may be anathema to many students coming from cultures where the emphasis is on the group rather than the individual. Because many nonnative students come from homogeneous cultures, they may have incorporated a "reader-responsible" style that relies on a shared understanding of the proper way to make an argument. Their arguments, then, in their indirection may look very different from the explicit "writer-responsible" style prevalent in western discourse (Hinds). Nonnative students' ideas about critical thinking and the concept of originality may also be quite different (Fox *Listening*, Pennycook, Johns "ESL Students"). Some non-native scholars have explored these kinds of cultural disconnects by

writing about their own experiences with literacy in the U.S. educational system (see Lu, for example).

The recent collection *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy* presents a range of perspectives that unite in calling for a broadening of standards and conventions in acceptable academic discourse in the United States. For example, coeditor Helen Fox, whose book *Listening to the World* is perhaps the best-known statement from this perspective, bases her argument in the essay "Being an Ally" on broadening what she regards as the U.S. university's "powerful, but at the same time, extremely narrow concept of thinking and communicating" (64). Other essays explore specific traditions in detail and question their relationship with what their authors see as the dominant discourse in the academy. For example, Malea Powell explores her own path as a Native American in the academy, and sees the connections and disjunctions between alternatives and academic discourse by juxtaposing images from native and academic cultures. Emphasizing syntax rather than rhetorical forms, Peter Elbow draws an important distinction between what he sees as a "recent rhetorical flowering" of alternative options for academic writers and "the virulent stigmatization of dialects that attaches more to grammar and syntax than it does to rhetoric." He offers to teachers a range of techniques for "inviting" students to try out their "home dialects" in school assignments, with suitable caveats, and shows how the process of drafting, revision, and editing can be adapted to help students translate, if they wish, or if the teacher requires that a final draft be in Standard Written English.

Among the earlier essays Elbow cites is Lisa Delpit's "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," which caused controversy when it appeared in 1988, as it ran counter to the prevailing arguments of advocates for educational methods that would present and sanction a wider array of voices. Taking to task such "well-intentioned White liberal" innovations as "dialect readers" in classrooms, Delpit, author of the 1986 essay "Skills and other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator," argued strongly for direct teaching of the "linguistic aspects of the culture of power" (571). Though not by any means advocating resistance to "the rules," the essay shares with the "alternative as resistance" literature an unquestioning sense of a discursive split between those "within" and those "outside" the power structure.

"Alternatives" as Options in a Fluid Mix of Disciplines and Genres

Other scholars wonder, however, just how resistant to change the academy and individual fields of interest might be. If disciplines are as hard to define as the research posits, and if genre is being constantly reinvented as exigencies change,

then how do we most productively regard the roles that new and different voices—the categories of our taxonomy—might play in a changing landscape? *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses in the Academy* also includes several articles that address this issue. For example, in her essay, coeditor Patricia Bizzell notes that “‘Alternative’ invokes a sort of countercultural image”; she suggests that the term “mixed” or “hybrid” might better convey what is alternative about the discourse, i.e., that it is a blend of “stylistic, cultural, and cognitive elements” and/or of traditional and nontraditional forms (ix). Jackie Jones Royster places the emphasis on “alternative *assumptions*” about discourses held by “the people who shape the discourses, use them, monitor them, and enforce their values. . .” (26). While these arguments over terminology are interesting, we find particularly useful the definition Paul Kei Matsuda gives in his concluding synthesis to the *ALT DIS* collection. Alternative discourse, he says, is “a marked form of discourse use within a particular site of discourse practices and in a certain socio-historic context” (192).

To us, this definition acknowledges the existence of, and perhaps struggle among, different voices, patterns of arrangement, language standards, etc., in any given rhetorical situation, academic or otherwise. But it also acknowledges the fluidity of the scene and the many factors that research has shown make definitions of “discipline,” “academic writing” and “genre” so difficult.

Our current research, then, takes place amid this ongoing debate. We wanted to find out how faculty defined “academic writing” in the disciplines and whether they sensed any of the tensions around disciplinary “standards” and “alternatives” as we’ve described these in our review of the literature. We also wanted to learn how they interpreted academic writing in their assignments and responses to student writers/writing. Similarly, we wanted to know how students interpreted their teachers’ expectations and whether these interpretations might be in conflict with their own goals for college writing. The following chapters describe, interpret, and apply our findings.

Our Methods and Materials

Our research sources include the following:

- Interviews, each lasting approximately an hour and a half, with faculty from 14 different disciplines, all successful writers and teachers. Our questions fell into three clusters:
 1. How do the informants define “standard” writing in their disciplines and what do they perceive as “alternatives” to that discourse?

2. Have our informants sometimes written in alternative forms? If so, how and why? If not, why not?
 3. What writing assignments do our informants give to students, and to what extent are those assignments intended to teach the standards and conventions of the discipline? Do our informants give assignments asking for alternative ways of thinking and writing about the discipline? How open are they to students' writing in alternative ways to the assignments they give?
- A survey of 20 short questions about writing in the disciplines administered to 183 students enrolled in nine different sections of a required upper-division advanced writing course. These sections vary according to the designations "Natural and Technological Sciences," "Business," "Social Sciences," and "Humanities," giving us a representative sampling of majors (40 in all) across the university;
 - Six student focus groups and one individual interview, consisting of a total of 36 students from a variety of majors, in order to deepen and clarify survey results;
 - Assessment data from 12 departmental/college workshops in which faculty evaluated the writing competence of their upper division students based on papers from writing-intensive courses. Faculty derived evaluation criteria through a holistic scoring process.
 - Timed (2-hour) essays by 40 undergraduate students from 22 majors, written as the final part of a credit-by-proficiency process by which self-selected students apply for exemption from a required advanced writing in the disciplines course.

Though we have limited our research to only one site, that being our own institution, we intend to create a kind of multidimensional model of academic writing—albeit partial—that takes into account the motives of writers working within a local institutional context (see Anson "Multidimensional"). We are well aware of other limitations of this kind of qualitative research, one being that researchers are always implicated in their research findings, possibly even more so when working at their own institutions and bringing—as we do—their own prior experiences and subjective understandings of the institutional culture to the scene of their research. That said, we would also argue that one of the givens of qualitative research is that the whole process is unavoidably subjective, from the design of survey and interview questions to the construction of meaning from the data that "emerges," including the analytical categories for coding that data, which are themselves derived from prior knowledge and experience. (For a good

discussion of coding, see Grant-Davie's "Coding Data: Issues of Validity, Reliability, and Interpretation.")

Another given is that conversation as a research tool—whether interviews or focus groups—is necessarily dynamic and “intersubjective” (Mortensen). Participants in focus groups, for example, are always responding not only to the researcher’s questions but also to one another’s contributions as well; in the process, they are continuously expanding their subjective understandings of both their past experiences and their present experience of the conversation at hand. Similarly, interviewees expand their understandings as the questions lead them from one topic to another. Add to this dynamic the informants’ goals for participation, their orientations toward the researchers and the research topic, their individual frames of reference, and the shifts that occur in these frames as the conversation proceeds. Another aspect of the intersubjectivity of our process, of course, is our collaboration itself. Each of us participated in all aspects of the research. In particular, in regard to the dynamics of interviews and focus groups, we didn’t so much take turns asking questions as observe the flow of questions and answers and jumped in as inspired, making observations from our experience that seemed to bear on what the informant was saying and inviting the informants’ responses to these as well.

To explain how these dynamics might affect what gets said in the conversation, we’ll turn to our own student focus groups for an example. The students who participated in our focus groups were self-selected; they came from sections of a required advanced writing in the disciplines course in response to our request for volunteers. (For the informed consent forms, see Figure 4–2 in Chapter Four.) Out of the 300 or so students who heard the request for volunteers, only 36 responded. Why these 36? What were their goals and motives for participating? Were they in any way representative of our overall student body? Were they generally good writers? Did they have generally good relationships with teachers? We could go on with this line of questioning, but the point is that we didn’t ask these questions in the focus groups, nor did we think it was necessary to do so given that our purpose in conducting focus groups was to deepen our understanding of the survey data we’d already gathered.

Thus, while we are assuming certain ethnographic limitations, we nevertheless believe that we can make claims about the contexts in which we conducted the investigation. In turn, we believe readers will find these claims relevant to understanding the contexts in which they work. We want to turn to a more detailed explanation of our research processes, including a description of our institution—the local context—our faculty informants, the assessment workshops, our survey instrument and the proficiency exam, and the makeup of the student focus groups.

George Mason University

George Mason is located in Fairfax, Virginia, in the fastest-growing, most diverse, and affluent part of the state, the burgeoning suburbs of Washington, D.C. GMU itself is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse universities in the country, with more than 25 percent of students nonnative speakers of English, a rich mix from around the globe (more than 100 language backgrounds represented). Growth and diversity have always been the main facts of life at GMU and, in fact, were the catalyst for WAC. George Mason teaches 29,000 students (two-thirds undergraduates), offers 60 bachelor's degrees, 62 master's degrees, 16 doctoral degrees, and one professional degree in law. It is a Carnegie Research II institution.

Faculty Informants

We interviewed 14 faculty members from a diverse array of disciplines, though only one is from a preprofessional field. We decided from the outset that we wanted to talk with faculty from across the disciplines whom we knew to be successful writers in their fields as well as teachers committed to student writers and writing. We gave priority to experienced writers who had achieved the scholarly success of tenure at the university, knowing that they had made decisions about their work based on expectations for tenuring in a research university, although two were tenure-line at the time of our interview (one has since achieved tenure). We determined their commitment to student writing based on our encounters with them in workshops, in various WAC projects, and in informal conversation. We'd known many of these faculty for years and relished the opportunity to talk to them systematically about their writing and teaching.

Our choice of faculty was motivated by several other factors as well. We knew that some were doing work that might be characterized as alternative, as we explained earlier. We wanted to know how aware they were of arguments about writing to resist or writing on the margins. We wondered, too, how they had developed their ideas of what was standard and alternative in their fields. We also wanted to be able to apply our findings to course design and to our work with faculty, so we were interested in talking with faculty who had taught writing-intensive or writing-infused classes. As we noted, we do not intend for these faculty to be taken as spokespersons for their disciplines although, as we will show, each could easily note either a formal center of their discipline in terms of ways of thinking, standards of evidence, and format, or a clear range of acceptable styles.

All the faculty we selected agreed to be informants for our research, and only one asked that we not tape-record his interview. We conducted all the interviews together, beginning with the same list of open-ended questions we have described earlier. We each took careful notes during the interview, and, after each interview, we wrote up and compared our notes, reviewed the tapes, adding and clarifying points, and then each of us coded our notes according to themes we saw developing. Although we have read pieces by almost all our faculty informants, we have not done a systematic analysis of their writing as part of this research for two reasons; one, we are primarily interested in their perspectives on their work overall and on the nature of writing in their chosen fields, and two, we felt that our interpretation of their writing might get in the way of a clear presentation of their perspectives.

We interviewed:

Debra Bergoffen, professor of philosophy; author of *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*

Keith Clark, associate professor of English and African-American studies; author of *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*. Also edits *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama*

Dina Copleman, associate professor of history; author of studies of 19th- and 20th-century London life

R. Christian Jones, professor of environmental sciences; author of numerous studies of wetlands ecology

Roger Lancaster, professor of anthropology; author of *Thanks to God and the Revolution* and *Life Is Hard*, his study of life in Nicaragua during the Sandinista regime, and, most recently, *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture*

Linda Miller, professor and department chair of dance; choreographer and writer about dance although now her writing is predominantly administrative

Victoria Rader, associate professor of sociology; author of *Signal Through the Flames*, her study of the homeless advocacy of Mitch Snyder

Priscilla Regan, associate professor of political science; author of *Legislating Privacy*, on federal debates regarding privacy vs. freedom of information and the new technologies

Lesley Smith, assistant professor, author of hypermedia

Robert Smith, professor and chair of psychology; author or coauthor of many articles and reports on the effects of substances on animals and humans

Jeanne Sorrell, professor of nursing and director of the Ph.D. in nursing; author of many articles on writing in the nursing profession; coproducer of videotapes on primary care

Daniele Struppa, associate professor of mathematical sciences and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; author or coauthor of articles and books on differential equations; a nonnative speaker of English, his first language is Italian

James Trefil, professor of physics and Robinson Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies; contributing writer to *Smithsonian Magazine*, and author or coauthor of popular books on science, typically reviewed in the *New York Times*

Walter Williams, professor of economics; author of numerous articles in economics and also a syndicated columnist

Student Survey Instrument

Since we were relying on the good graces of our composition colleagues to administer the survey in their advanced writing classes, we attempted to develop a survey that would take no more than 15 minutes to answer and that would make sense to students at the same time that it was specific enough to yield useful information about their perceptions of assigned writing in their major courses. The survey consisted of 20 short answer and Likert Scale questions, including four questions asking the student's major, number of courses he or she had taken in the major, a particular area of interest or concentration within the major, and whether English is a first language. The remainder of the questions focused on students' awareness of the characteristics of good writing in their majors, how they had learned those characteristics, the kinds of writing tasks they'd been assigned in their major, whether they were given what they perceived to be atypical assignments, and the degree to which they perceived their teachers to be strict on conventions or accepting of alternatives. (For the full survey, see Figure 4-1 on pages 97–98.) Although we received 183 responses to our survey from students in 40 different majors, we quickly saw the gaps and ambiguities in many of our questions when we began collating the results.

Student Focus Groups

We decided to conduct focus groups as a way to help clarify and deepen our understanding of the survey results. As we've mentioned, only 36 students, of

the approximately 300 who were invited, volunteered to participate in our focus groups. We consulted about our procedures with our Director of Institutional Assessment, who told us that such a small yield is not unusual. Even when students are offered incentives for participating (like the free lunch we provided), those who volunteer tend to be the more engaged and committed learners. We conducted six different focus groups (and one individual interview) to accommodate these students' schedules. Each group consisted of a variety of majors with a total of 12 different majors represented. Because each focus group yielded somewhat similar information, albeit with a few surprises, we feel confident that we would have received much of the same data had we been able to include more students and/or a more diverse group of students. While we had asked the participants to fill out a form listing their major, number of courses taken in the major, and total number of credits, we did not ask for other kinds of demographic information, such as GPA, preferred learning styles, or aspects of their personal identities, for example. We did not necessarily need such information—though it might have been interesting—nor did we want to seem intrusive. We can say, however, that, apart from their varied majors, our participants do not reflect the diversity of our student body: 11 were females, four were of non-Anglo race/ethnicities (Chinese, Iranian, Latina, African American), and only one was a nonnative speaker. Our institution, on the other hand, has a much higher proportion of non-Anglo/nonnative students and is over 50 percent female.

Essays Written for Course Exemption

Another source of data, described in more detail in Chapter Four, derives from timed (2-hour) essays written by upper-division students seeking exemption from a required writing-in-the-disciplines course—English 302. From a pool of approximately 60 essays responding to questions about the papers in the accompanying portfolio and what the writer had learned about writing in the major, we selected 40 essays by students from 22 majors.

Criteria from Departmental Assessment Workshops and Faculty Surveys

Over the same time period that we were interviewing faculty and surveying students, the university Writing Assessment Group, of which we are a part, was also engaged in a departmentally based assessment of students' writing competence in response to a state mandate. A full description of this process along with some of the departmental results, is available on the George Mason University WAC website at: <http://wac.gmu.edu/program/assessing/phase4.html>. While

these workshops were not part of our research design, they've given us valuable insights into faculty expectations for students' writing in the upper-division courses in their majors. Prior to conducting the departmental workshops, the assessment group distributed a university-wide survey to determine what faculty viewed as the most important writing skills for students to acquire in their disciplines, the kinds of assignments they gave related to these skills, their perceptions of the students' proficiency in these skills, and strategies they use to teach with writing in their courses. We will be referring to some of the criteria that faculty derived in these workshops in Chapters Three and Five.