

CHAPTER 8.

BEYOND THE BINARY: USING
CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS
TO NAVIGATE CONVENTIONS
FOR ANTIRACIST WAC

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Abstract. Through an antiracist lens, this chapter explores the challenges of addressing language conventions in writing across the curriculum (WAC). Drawing on empirical research and critical language awareness (CLA), the authors challenge the binary of either teaching conventions as assimilationist or avoiding them altogether. They propose “critical transparency” as a “both/and” approach and argue for explicit instruction in conventions alongside critical examination of their origins, impacts, and alternatives. The chapter provides examples of critical transparency in WAC contexts and offers a heuristic centered on agency, access, asset, and advocacy to guide practitioners in implementing CLA principles.

Though scholars of color have long noted the need for greater attention to racial equity in writing studies (Pimentel, 2021), calls for antiracist work have never been more prominent (e.g., Association for Writing Across the Curriculum, 2020; Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2020; Inoue, 2019). The need for racial justice work is especially pressing in writing across the curriculum (WAC), which is dominated by White administrators and has historically paid less attention to race than other subfields of writing studies (Anson, 2012; Lerner, 2018). While coordinating with disciplinary faculty on racial equity work can pose challenges, it is also an important opportunity to extend antiracist pedagogy across campuses. Thus, practical strategies for this work are especially needed.

Our own scholarly work speaks to this moment in WAC. Jessa Wood’s empirical research examines how WAC administrators at institutions across

the US are adopting antiracist/racial equity-oriented approaches to WAC and disseminating antiracist and inclusive pedagogies across their campuses (Wood, 2024). She found that most participants reported actively engaging in at least some antiracist work in their programs. However, many were not fully satisfied with their efforts: 77 percent felt that their programs were not doing enough to address systemic racism on their campuses. One particular challenge cited by participants was the complexity of navigating discussions of linguistic conventions with disciplinary writing faculty. Selected findings from this study will be unpacked later in this chapter.

Through this research, Wood connected with Shawna Shapiro, whose work focuses on critical language awareness (CLA) approaches to writing pedagogy (e.g., Shapiro, 2022). Together, we began to identify ways that CLA might provide framing and approaches to help WAC/WID instructors and administrators engage critically with writing conventions, helping nuance a problematic binary framing of complete assimilation or avoidance as our only options for addressing conventions. This framing, we argue, hinders antiracist WAC work.

This chapter is the outgrowth of those conversations. We begin with a brief introduction to Wood's study and to CLA. We identify student *agency* as a shared core goal of both antiracist WAC and CLA writing pedagogy. We then share findings from Wood's research indicating that many WAC administrators view teaching about conventions, particularly conventions of standardized written English, as an assimilationist practice that hinders student agency. This viewpoint can create tensions with disciplinary faculty, who more frequently view teaching conventions as a means of increasing students' agency as participants in academic disciplines. We note that some WID practitioners have already begun adopting more nuanced approaches to conventions in their work with disciplinary faculty.

These findings suggest the need for a nuanced approach to both linguistic and disciplinary conventions—an endeavor in which, we argue, CLA may be helpful. We offer the concept of *critical transparency*, informed by CLA's pragmatic yet progressive orientation, as a way to give students access to conventions *and* critically contextualize those conventions. We provide examples of transparency in action within various WAC contexts and conclude with a heuristic of questions centered around four values—agency, access, asset, and advocacy—which can support other practitioners in using CLA to pursue antiracist and linguistically just WAC work.

BACKGROUND ON WOOD'S STUDY OF WAC ADMINISTRATORS' APPROACHES TO ANTIRACIST WORK

Throughout this chapter, we draw on findings from Wood's IRB-approved empirical research, which utilized a survey and semi-structured interviews with

WAC administrators from diverse institutions across the US. Questions explored how participants understood the role of racial equity work in WAC, whether/how they worked to promote racial equity in their programs, and what, if any, challenges they faced in that work.

The 45 participants brought a range of backgrounds, identities, and roles, including wide-ranging years of WAC experience, educational backgrounds, self-reported expertise in antiracist/DEIJ work, and position types. Participants worked in a range of institutions and program types: a mix of public and private institutions, representing all U.S. geographic regions, ranging from community colleges to large R1s: 81.8 percent of participants worked at predominantly White institutions, while 25.0 percent worked at minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Notably, the participants were all White (88.4%) and Asian (11.6%). This sample is likely fairly representative of racial demographics in the field of WAC (Wood, 2024), but it's nevertheless important to note that the study primarily captures White perspectives. In interpreting the data, we primarily use participant perspectives to identify challenges faced by *some* practitioners in order to offer potential solutions for those experiencing similar struggles on their campuses, without suggesting that these trends necessarily hold for all WAC programs or practitioners or that participants represent the full range of possible antiracist perspectives or interventions.

For the larger study, the data were open coded using a modified grounded theory methodology (Wood, 2024). In this text, because we found alignment between CLA and participants' conceptions of their work, we read Wood's findings in conversation with CLA, with a focus on how participants spoke to faculty about the connections between writing conventions and student agency.

BACKGROUND ON CLA: A PRAGMATIC AND PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

The term "critical language awareness" (CLA) dates back to the late 1980s and was coined by linguists and literacy scholars to reference an instructional approach that attends explicitly to the social and political aspects of language (Janks, 2010; Shapiro, 2022). CLA pedagogy has been adapted for a variety of classroom settings, including English language arts, world/heritage instruction, and English for academic or professional purposes (Shapiro & Lorimer Leonard, 2023). It is only recently that CLA has been taken up in college writing (e.g., Hankerson, 2022; Shapiro, 2022), and there has been very little attention to CLA in WAC (Shapiro, 2023).

Ideologically, a CLA approach to writing pedagogy aims to be both *pragmatic* and *progressive*, pushing against binary thinking about linguistic justice

that tends to position teaching about conventions as in direct opposition to creating space for resistance. This orientation is rooted in an intellectual tradition known as “critical pragmatism” (Ruecker & Shapiro, 2020). With a CLA approach, students receive explicit instruction in standardized language and other written conventions, and have opportunities to contextualize, critique, and at times resist those conventions (e.g., Gere et al., 2021). This nuanced, “both/and” approach to conventions is particularly helpful in the context of WAC/WID, where most disciplinary faculty expect students to recognize and use disciplinary genres and norms, as well as to follow conventions of Standardized Written English (SW). As Shapiro (2023) explains in her discussion of “Why WAC Needs CLA”:

A CLA approach suggests that we—and our students—do not have to choose between elevating or rejecting academic norms and linguistic standards. Rather, we “work with the tensions” ... around those norms and standards ... so that students have the tools they need *both* to use [those] conventions *and* to critique and even resist those conventions, when they choose to do so. (p. 86, emphasis original)

Or, to put it more succinctly, using framing from Black/African American rhetorics scholar Carmen Kynard (2021): We must teach students from diverse language backgrounds to “play the game” without “letting the game play you.”

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE BETWEEN CLA AND ANTIRACIST APPROACHES

Both CLA and antiracist approaches are grounded in a commitment to writer *agency*—i.e., the ability to make informed choices about one’s own writing and languaging practices. Both recognize that uncritically expecting use of SWE can hinder agency for users of other, minoritized language varieties (Young et al., 2018), particularly Black language users (Baker-Bell, 2020). These approaches both emphasize how writing policies and pedagogies can (re)center the agency of multilingual and multidialectal writers by celebrating and building on the linguistic and cultural assets students bring to the classroom.

Where CLA approaches differ from many antiracist approaches to writing pedagogy, including in WAC, is in their orientation to conventions. Given the close historical relationship between teaching and enforcing conventions, antiracist scholars often frame emphasizing conventions as an inherently assimilationist, and therefore harmful, endeavor (e.g., Green & Condon, 2020; Inoue,

as cited in Lerner, 2018; Villanueva, 2011). When conventions are studied as part of an antiracist WAC curriculum, the emphasis is often on challenging or resisting those conventions (e.g., García de Müeller & Cortés Lagos, 2023). Such critiques lead many faculty to conclude that they should minimize attention to sentence-level language altogether in order to avoid privileging particular dialects or penalizing students for their language backgrounds (MacDonald, 2007; Micciche, 2004; Pawlowski, 2024)—a response that Zoe Esterly et al. (2023) call an “avoidance approach.” We see avoidance frames as the consequence of a binary approach to conventions that leads practitioners to see any instruction in and around conventions as inherently incompatible with student agency and respect for students’ linguistic assets.

A CLA approach raises the possibility of revising this binary thinking, promoting a “both/and approach” to language (and other) conventions that is both pragmatic and progressive. It suggests that, as part of increasing students’ agency, we can offer instruction in conventions and opportunities for informed decision-making around, feedback on, and reflection about use of conventions as a means of expanding—but not replacing—students’ existing linguistic repertoires (Shapiro et al., 2016; Shapiro & Perrault, in press). We find a CLA approach particularly well-suited to WAC work, which involves navigating conversations about a variety of disciplinary writing conventions as well as conventions for standardized language use.

APPROACHES TO AGENCY AND CONVENTIONS IN PARTICIPANT DATA

The dynamics described above were salient in data from Wood’s (2024) study, which found a widespread emphasis on agency, often understood as resistance to convention. For example, one typical interviewee explained that she centers students’ “authorship identity,” saying students should “get to pick how they present themselves” (Wood, 2024, p. 171). Another participant (not quoted in the original text) described “giving the student the voice and the agency” as an alternative to WAC’s “assimilationist” roots.

An avoidance approach was common among participants as a way of responding to questions about conventions from disciplinary writing faculty. One representative participant in the study noted that in their work with WID faculty, they advocated “minimizing any concern with grammar or adherence to standard language,” especially in assessment criteria. Another said that, while they would love for their program to lead more in-depth conversations about dialect with faculty, their primary short-term priority was ensuring faculty are “not providing line edits on grammar.”

For these participants, *decreased* emphasis on language conventions was crucial for respecting students' identities and increasing agency. For example, one participant said:

[Many faculty] always want students to do the standard edited American English, like this very perfect-looking final version of something. And I just want people to realize that we have people from all kinds of backgrounds at our institution ... and understand that you can't really expect that.

Similarly, another participant argued that too much focus on conventions and sentence-level language might reinforce "a system that really reifies a lot of these hegemonic systems of power, ... around language, around race"—i.e., perpetuating, rather than combating, institutionalized racism. These participants' responses reflected the "assimilation vs. avoidance" binary outlined above, where any attention to language conventions is seen as detracting from agency and engaging assimilation.

However, these participants also reported sometimes finding themselves at an impasse with disciplinary faculty who saw teaching conventions as an important piece of students' access to disciplines. For instance, one representative participant noted that, while her colleagues were often initially excited by progressive approaches from scholars such as April Baker-Bell (2020), they voiced concerns that "when [students] get to Dr. So-and-So's class, or when they get to their capstone, or when they submit to this journal as a grad student ... they're going to get pushback on that." Other participants highlighted faculty and/or institutional positions that seemed to demand more prescriptive approaches to language: One described "a continual pressure to 'prepare students for the workforce,' which is communicated as forcing students to learn EAE [edited American English]."¹ Moreover, participants noted that students themselves may want access to "the dominant canon, the dominant forms of writing" (as one put it) in order to achieve their academic, professional, or personal goals. These responses highlight the high stakes of resisting conventions in many rhetorical situations, which render exclusive avoidance a less appealing instructional strategy for those seeking to empower students.

Thus, data from Wood's study suggested that an avoidance approach to conventions might not be sufficient to sustain effective collaborations with disciplinary writing colleagues, nor to address students' (real or perceived) academic

1 These tensions are echoed in research by Adrienne Jankens et al. (2023), who found many disciplinary faculty felt torn between "wanting to value non-standard forms" (p. 56) in order to be more inclusive and equitable, "but [being unable to] stop valuing standard forms" (p. 56) because they see facility with those forms as essential to students' academic and professional success.

needs. These findings suggest that a more nuanced approach to conventions might be necessary for WAC programs to fulfill their curricular mission, which includes the need for pragmatic buy-in and sustained collaboration with disciplinary faculty. At the same time, however, pragmatism should not mean forfeiting a progressive commitment to antiracism and linguistic justice.

A MORE NUANCED APPROACH TO DISCIPLINARY CONVENTIONS AMONG WID FACULTY

Notably, participants in Wood's study were more likely to endorse nuanced approaches to disciplinary conventions than language conventions. This was particularly true of participants whose work aligned more closely with writing in the disciplines (WID) than WAC, since WID has a stronger history of engaging with conventions than WAC, given that it is generally grounded in specific disciplines rather than writing-to-learn across disciplines. Some WID program leaders in Wood's study pointed out that knowledge of disciplinary conventions was important to students' agency as members of academic disciplines and communities, because those conventions reflect disciplinary ways of thinking and interacting. This linkage is well documented in WID scholarship. As Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (2022) explain, "composed knowledge, aka writing, reflects epistemologies that circulate within courses and fields," reflecting those communities' "values, cultures, and strategies for learning" (p. 24). Writing practices are also tied closely to disciplinary identity and academic socialization (e.g., Lillis & Harrington, 2015), meaning that as students engage in disciplinary writing, they develop an increased sense of belonging in those fields of study.

Several participants specifically spoke about the need to promote access to disciplinary communities through explicit teaching of conventions, while also leaving open the possibility for resisting or changing conventions. As one participant who identified as a WID scholar explained,

I would say that people in some of the sciences are really struggling, ... authentically, to figure out how permeable their discourse expectations can be, if they're going to continue to participate in the scientific community in the ways they have been ... [given] how the mandate for replicability of process works.

This participant indicated a need to "expand without replacing" disciplinary writing practices by both teaching students current practices and creating opportunities for new approaches. Along similar lines, another participant drew on

Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2022) between providing “access” to disciplines (and disciplinary conventions) as they currently exist and offering students “opportunity” to transform those disciplines/conventions by drawing on their existing assets (p. 8). The participant explained:

Faculty in the disciplines ought to make the discourses and epistemologies more transparent to provide access to the discipline, but also ... provide opportunities for students to bring their individual experiences, language, and commitments to the discipline in ways that might transform it.

In short, some participants in Wood’s study recognized the possibility of a nuanced approach to disciplinary conventions that promotes neither complete conformity nor absolute resistance, recognizing that learning about conventions contributes to academic socialization but can also highlight opportunities for principled resistance. However, when it came to language conventions, participants were less likely to endorse “both/and” approaches, falling instead into the “assimilation vs. avoidance” binary discussed earlier.

BEYOND THE BINARY: CRITICAL TRANSPARENCY AS A BOTH/AND APPROACH TO LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

One way to think about the findings presented above is that they highlight a shared commitment to student agency, but divergent views on whether and how teaching about conventions is aligned with this commitment. Some participants justified the teaching of disciplinary conventions as a gesture toward access, which is in line with their commitment to equity. But others felt that teaching about conventions—particularly language conventions—was inherently assimilationist and likely did more harm than good, leaving little room for recognizing student assets. These findings suggested a need for a more nuanced approach to language conventions that transcends the assimilation vs. avoidance binary, helping to increase students’ access and agency in line with the goals of antiracism.

In the remainder of this chapter, we offer such an approach, informed by CLA, called *critical transparency*. With this orientation, instructors aim to be as explicit as possible in teaching writing conventions, but they do so in a way that openly acknowledges the contexts, harms, and alternatives for those conventions—especially when it comes to Standardized Written English. In other words, the aim is to demystify the “rules” of writing in a way that includes contextualization and critique. Such an approach leverages the values of agency, access, asset, and advocacy that are at the heart of a CLA approach to language (e.g., Shapiro, 2023) and which we have highlighted in participants’ responses.

Critical transparency allows us to be pragmatic in our writing instruction, since students increase their knowledge about linguistic norms and conventions, while also being progressive, since students gain insight into the origins, impacts, and alternatives to those norms and conventions. That progressive aspect of a CLA approach can and should include invitations for students to draw on their existing linguistic and cultural assets, in keeping with the Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s (2022) notion of “providing opportunities” (p. 8). Moreover, this approach assumes that we are not just helping students to adjust to a static academy. Rather, we need to engage in advocacy work to promote antiracist and linguistically just curricula, instruction, and policies. Again, at the heart of this approach is the “both/and” of teaching students what they need today but also promoting access and justice for tomorrow.

Within the data from Wood’s study, we did identify a few examples of this critical transparency orientation. In addition to the both/and approaches to disciplinary conventions highlighted above, another participant highlighted the danger of teaching genre features in an overgeneralizing and uncritical way—e.g., in saying “This is the way you write an abstract,” or “This is the way you write a lab report,” without “critically interrogating the why of that, and then who’s left out when you insist on having it done that way.” Another participant pointed out that even though her own subfield of technical writing can be highly prescriptive, students appreciate learning that this sort of writing “doesn’t always look the same in every context.” However, many participants also seemed to be uncertain how to enact something like critical transparency in their contexts, even as they grappled with competing desires to promote access and opportunity. We hope that the remainder of this article, which discusses how critical transparency might be put into practice, supports a greater uptake of this approach.

APPLYING A CRITICAL TRANSPARENCY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS IN WAC/WID

Critical transparency begins with presenting language conventions in a critical context. This means examining them not as universal “rules” but as cultural norms that reflect particular values and epistemologies. Some of the rhetorical moves we might make in discussing conventions from a critical transparency perspective include:

- Linking conventions to academic cultural values (e.g., highlighting how authors—especially U.S. authors—are expected to show “originality” and/or “contribution” in the language they use to craft thesis statements or to establish a “gap” in scholarship);

- Identifying how conventions vary across disciplines and genres (e.g., Aull, 2015; “Write Like a Scientist” website);
- Identifying the rhetorical and epistemological purpose of conventions through a rhetorical grammar approach (e.g., Salvatore, 2021);
- Historicizing conventions, so students know where they come from and how they get reified and perpetuated (e.g., Aull & Shapiro, 2023) and identifying how academic writing changes over time (e.g., Brennan, 2024; “Scientific,” 2016);
- Recognizing potential problems with current conventions—i.e., Who gets excluded? What gets lost?
- Looking at cases of resistance to current conventions (e.g., academic writing that incorporates non-dominant languages and dialects; emerging contexts where translanguaging and dialectical variety are more accepted, such as writing for public audiences or multilingual publishing).

Another way we can increase students’ awareness and knowledge of language conventions is by encouraging rhetorical reading of disciplinary (or other) texts with particular attention to writers’ language choices (e.g., Aull & Shapiro, 2025). As they read, students might consider questions like these:

- What linguistic patterns seem “built in” to this genre of writing, and why? What are the affordances and constraints of these linguistic choices (e.g., the use of passive voice in “methods” sections is meant to convey objectivity, but can be clunky and can obscure researcher positionality; see Inzunza, 2020)?
- How does this author’s language compare to others we’ve read?
- What is a quote from the text that you thought was particularly well-worded? What made it effective?
- Are there places where the author could have used language that was clearer, more concise, and/or more accessible? (see Shapiro & Aull, 2023, for more on accessible language in writing)
- How do this author’s racial and other identities and/or privileges affect how their choices might be received by audiences—especially if they are challenging conventions?
- What is a linguistic strategy you could experiment with in your writing? How might this strategy impact your audiences? What risks might be involved?

As an extension of this process, students might also critically analyze existing style guides to see what values and assumptions underlie their recommendations, and/or work individually or as a group to create a “style guide” identifying

conventions they find important (e.g., always capitalizing “Black” when used as a racial identity/category, as is recommended in some citation formats, such as APA). In reflective memos on their writing, students can also be asked to answer similar questions about their own writing in reflective writing such as a reflective memo about their draft.

A critical transparency approach also makes space for some assignments that invite students to break with conventions, through mixing codes or genres. For their own writing classes, Shapiro and Wood have designed assignments in which students write for an audience outside the academy, in which case they will likely *not* follow disciplinary conventions and may incorporate language varieties other than standardized English (see Chapter 7 of Shapiro, 2022, for examples). However, this approach does not mean the writing is a “free-for-all.” Instead, students must investigate the typical conventions for their chosen genre and audience and explain their choices to follow or break with those conventions.

Critical transparency can also inform how we respond to student writing—a major concern for many of Wood’s participants, who noticed that disciplinary faculty sometimes engaged in harsh critiques of student language. A critical transparency approach encourages faculty to be thoughtful and explicit about *whether* and *why* we are responding to students’ linguistic choices in their writing—a decision that varies depending on the nature of the assignment and on where the student is in the writing process (Shapiro & Perrault, in press). Shapiro urges faculty to focus on language choices that impact clarity (e.g., inconsistent verb tenses, lack of subject/verb agreement, and use of the wrong form of a word, such as the adjective “economic” when the noun “economy” is needed). She invites them to spend less time on choices that are less central to clarity—e.g., missing articles (*a, an, the*), which can be ignored or maybe noted as a general pattern (Shapiro, 2022). Of course, for high stakes writing, such as a graduate school application, faculty may wish to flag all unconventional language choices but allow the student to make the “edits” themselves, honoring their agency.

Although disciplinary faculty may not adopt all of these pedagogical applications, we can help to promote critical (and transparent!) conversations about language and convention even in small ways. For example, Wood worked with a faculty member in biology to identify key language-related debates in her discipline, including calls to move away from the colonial terms “old world” and “new world” to refer to species, and an increased use of the first-person (I, we) to acknowledge observational subjectivity. They discussed benefits from students’ learning of these (evolving) conventions as a means of increasing access to disciplinary learning and promoting their agency as scientific writers. Shapiro has had conversations with many faculty about the shifting language conventions in their fields and has developed a list of “bad academic metaphors”—i.e., analogies

that were used in the past—particularly in writing for public audiences—but have been problematized more recently among specialists in the field. Examples of this include the use of “war” to talk about public health (e.g., “war on drugs”) and the use of “melting pot” (versus “salad bowl,” for example) as a metaphor for diverse communities (Shapiro, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND HEURISTIC

We hope this article has provided useful insights about how WAC administrators and faculty can address both disciplinary and language conventions with greater confidence and efficacy, in order to enact our commitment to racial and linguistic justice in pragmatic and progressive ways. We offer the heuristic below as a resource that can be used by administrators and instructors to reflect on how they might take up a CLA approach in their WAC work, centered around four CLA values: access, agency, asset, and advocacy. Although we have focused primarily on curriculum and instruction in this chapter, the value of advocacy encourages us to consider relevance as well to institutional policy-making, resource development, and even support for faculty in their own writing-all activities that fall within the purview of some WAC programs. Readers interested in more CLA-oriented resources—as well as opportunities for online conversation on these topics—may wish to visit <https://clacollective.org/>.

HEURISTIC: CLA REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR WAC FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Access

- How can I be transparent, explicit, *and* critical in talking about disciplinary norms/conventions?
- How can I help students understand academic disciplines as linguistic communities, to support students’ socialization into the academy?

Agency

- Where might I create opportunities for students to practice informed, supported decision-making as language users?
- How can I help students assess the benefits and risks of challenging academic norms and conventions in a range of contexts?
- How can I tailor my feedback and assessment practices to increase students’ capacity and confidence in evaluating the impact of their linguistic and rhetorical choices?

Asset

- How can I take my students' goals, experiences, and interests into account in curriculum design and instruction?
- How might I broaden the range of genres, codes, and styles of communication included in my course materials, activities, and assignments?

Advocacy

- How can I advocate for more equitable and inclusive structures and practices at my institution, so that the burden of adjustment is not on students alone?
- How might I contribute to linguistic equity and inclusion in my own scholarly communication and disciplinary participation?

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