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Connecting writing and language in assessment: Examining style, tone, and argument in the U.S. Common Core standards and in exemplary student writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing assessment criteria often separate language and writing standards, reflecting an implicit dichotomy between "writing" and "language" in which conventions and style can appear tangential to writing categories like argument and development of ideas. This article examines U.S. Common Core standards and student writing selected as exemplifying those standards in light of discourse-level features noted in applied linguistic and composition research. In so doing, it aims to help expose connections between *organization*, *argument/claim development*, *style*, *conventions*, and *tone* via patterns in academic writing. In this way, the article considers assessment standards and their use as opportunities to examine and clarify connections between the arguments students are encouraged to construct and the discourse options students have.

1. Introduction

Academic language is an acquired repertoire. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron call it "educationally profitable linguistic capital" that "has never been anyone's mother tongue" (Bourdieu

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& Passeron, 1990, pp. 115–116). In English, James Berlin calls it the "certain version" of the language privileged as U.S. higher education began to expand in the 19th-century, an expansion that imposed lasting standards on secondary and college writing that were "clearly dialectal biases of a particular class." For Berlin as for Bourdieu and Passeron, this academic version of the language is a kind of capital: a tool for upward mobility and "the good things in life" (1984, pp. 72–73).

In the 19th-century U.S. shift Berlin describes, the ability to write "correctly"—as per the privileged version of English used by the professional class—became "an important rite in the entrance process for college" that was to be protected by teachers of English Composition (p. 72). Then and since, as students attempt to transition from secondary to post-secondary writing, they must especially use this version of English to make arguments, the primary task of written academic genres (Crompton, 1997, p. 273). We might more aptly say, then, that academic language and also its particular use are acquired tools for access: academic language is no one's mother tongue, and academic argumentation must be taught as well.

This condensed trajectory of the relationship between academic language, arguments, and access begs questions that still seem unanswered vis-à-vis secondary and early college writing assessment. Perhaps most important—and most tacit for students—is the overarching question: How exactly is academic language related to academic arguments? More specific questions concern assessment standards: How are expectations like *language* and *style* and *argument* related? How are these expectations evaluated via assessment standards, and how are students prepared to be evaluated according to them?

At least implicitly, separate writing and language standards risk suggesting that *language* and *style* expectations can be evaluated—and therefore, one assumes, taught—separately from *writing* expectations related to the development of argumentative claims. This kind of distinction, though, is common. For instance, Matsuda and Jeffery (2012) outline separate language and writing standards in rubrics used in recent English language testing and secondary and post-secondary U.S. writing exams.[1] These rubrics contain language-based criteria that reference "skillful use of language," "apt vocabulary," and "mastery of conventions"; and the latter appears to refer to "few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing." These criteria are distinct from writing-based categories like "effectively and insightfully develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates outstanding critical thinking" and "well organized. . .demonstrating clear coherence and smooth progression of ideas" (Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012, p. 155). Similarly, U.S. Common Core criteria includes language standards that refer to "effective choices for meaning or style," but accompanying examples specify style as "formal style and objective tone" without elucidating how such stylistic features relate to "meaning" or to writing standards concerning argument development.[2]

U.S. assessment standards that intimate a dichotomy between writing and language are at least partly explained by historical and disciplinary distinctions between linguistics and composition studies, particularly since the 1960s (Aull, 2015b). Based on his corpus analysis of current college composition rubrics from 83 public universities across the U.S., Dryer argues that some issues stem from assessment categories that overlap without clear indication of how and why they relate to one another. For instance, he writes that in many first-year writing rubrics, "*style* is insufficiently disambiguated from *organization*, and neither has been made adequately distinct from *thesis*. . .[and] the language grouped under the *assignment*, *audience*, and *grammar* traits was not as easily grouped with any other trait or subgroup" (2013, pp. 15–16).[3] Dryer's study offers a valuable synopsis of rubrics that function as part of the transition from secondary to post-secondary writing, but an alternative

[1] In their study, Matsuda and Jeffery analyze rubrics used within the past 10 years in English language exams like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as well as standardized U.S. secondary exams like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the advanced placement (AP) language and composition exams, and graduate-level (GRE) writing exams.

[2] See http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/ for more information on the U.S. Common Core standards and for the appendix of student writing samples examined in this article.

[3] A similar lack of clarity has been noted with ill-defined concept of *voice* (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Stapleton, 2002). The term *voice* is not referenced in the Common Core standards (as noted by Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012), but it seems directly related to the concepts and examples of *style* and *tone* discussed in detail below.