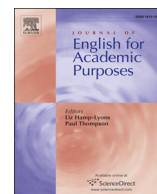


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# Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap)

## Expressing stance in undergraduate writing: Discipline-specific and general qualities



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 June 2015

Received in revised form 7 May 2016

Accepted 20 May 2016

#### Keywords:

Corpus analysis

Stance

Hedging

Undergraduate writing

Argumentation

### ABSTRACT

The expression of *stance*—defined broadly as expression of attitudes, epistemic judgments, and interactional involvement—is increasingly recognized as an important, though hidden, feature of both expert and student academic writing, one with potentially “much impact on the success of writing” (Wingate, 2012, p. 147). The study this article reports is motivated by the question of whether there are stance-taking qualities in undergraduate students’ coursework writing that, in addition to being valued within specific course contexts, are valued across contexts. Specifically, it presents results from a corpus-based comparative analysis of stance in high- and low-graded papers written in two distinct undergraduate courses at a university in the United States. The investigation reveals both contextual specificity and overlap across the HG papers. It shows that the HG papers in both courses expressed stance with significantly greater frequency than the corresponding LG papers and in ways that project greater contrastiveness, critical distance, and positive alignment with disciplinary concepts. These three stance qualities, I suggest, are a part of a general novice academic stance that may be implicitly expected in students’ coursework writing across a range of contexts, especially formal assignments calling for “critical analysis” and evidence-based argumentation.

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### 1. Introduction

In the past twenty years, there has been an accumulating body of research in writing studies on how students express stance in their coursework writing. *Stance* is understood here as encompassing three closely related discursive components: the writer’s stance toward the subject matter at hand (*attitudinal stance*), toward the status of knowledge (*epistemic stance*), and toward the putative reader (*interactional stance*) (cf. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Hyland, 2005b; White, 2003). We now have comparative studies from English for Academic Purposes, or EAP (e.g., Bruce, 2016), and from U.S.-based Composition/Rhetorical Studies (e.g., Soliday, 2004) that have examined the linguistic challenges student writers face in expressing appropriate and effective stances in different disciplinary contexts. We also have studies using Appraisal theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (e.g., Lancaster, 2014; Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2014; Wu, 2007) that have teased out how undergraduates writing in single courses or in response to specific prompts use language to express stance in more and less valued ways. By focusing on stance as a situated, dialogic quality of academic discourse, these studies have suggested new ways to talk with students, EAP instructors, and disciplinary faculty about language use in academic writing

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2016.05.006>

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that extend well beyond characterizations like “clear,” “concise,” and “well-organized” to include interpersonal considerations that guide writers' language choices.

Despite these gains, however, there have been (to my knowledge) no systematic comparative studies of stance expression in high- and lower-graded (HG and LG) student papers written in more than one field or course. It is therefore unclear whether there are rhetorical qualities of stance expression that, in addition to being valued within specific undergraduate contexts, also travel across contexts—a question with considerable implications for academic writing instruction. This article presents results from a corpus-based comparative study of stance in HG and LG papers written in two upper-level undergraduate courses at a large university in the United States. These two distinct courses, one an economics course firmly situated in the social sciences and the other a political theory course firmly situated in the humanities, both required that students write formal evidence-based argumentative papers. By drawing on detailed text analysis of these papers, combined with results from instructor interviews, this study aims to uncover the degree to which there is coherence-within-diversity with regard to valued stance expression at the undergraduate level.

### 1.1. Research pointing to shared stance qualities

Writing research for the past thirty years or more has viewed academic writing largely through the lens of “specificity” (cf. Hyland, 2002). Research in rhetorical genre studies, for instance, has examined undergraduate students' struggles to understand the specific genre and epistemological expectations that underlie their teachers' assignment and assessment practices, expectations that often are understood only tacitly by the instructors and therefore communicated obliquely if at all (see, e.g., Beaufort, 2007; Giltrow & Valiquette, 1994; Wilder, 2012). Linguistic examinations of student texts in EAP/ESP, furthermore, have uncovered variation by discipline in multiple dimensions of language use (e.g., Bruce, 2016; Hardy & Römer, 2013; Samraj, 2004). Running somewhat counter to this focus on specificity, however, are ethnographic writing studies (e.g., Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006) that point to shared rhetorical expectations—or at least a shared vocabulary for articulating expectations—for undergraduate academic writing writ large.

One expectation that is articulated across a wide variety of disciplinary contexts is that students display “critical thinking” through their writing. As discussed by Woodward-Kron (2002), “critical thinking/analysis/reasoning” is an important aim for undergraduate writing in university departments throughout Australia, North America, the U.K., and elsewhere. These terms appear regularly in course syllabi, writing textbooks, assignment prompts, and outcome statements. Yet, as Woodward-Kron makes clear, defining what “critical analysis” involves and then pinpointing for students how it is accomplished in texts are difficult tasks. Awareness of this difficulty has motivated research in EAP and SFL on the textual resources students need to accomplish a critical stance in specific contexts (e.g., Bruce, 2016; Lee, 2008; Woodward-Kron, 2002). This research does show that these textual resources vary across fields, genres, courses, and assignments, as we would expect. However, due to the methodological gap indicated above, it is unclear whether there may also be discernable rhetorical qualities of a critical stance (as opposed to an “uncritical” stance) that are shared across high-achieving undergraduate papers that require evidence-based argumentation.

The concept of *student genres*—also referred to as curriculum genres, classroom genres, or student coursework genres (Johns, 1997; Nesi & Gardner, 2012)—offers a theoretical basis for exploring this possibility of coherence-within-diversity in stance qualities. We know that genres coalesce around and are shaped rhetorically and linguistically by “sets of communicative purposes” (Askehave & Swales, 2001, p. 165). For expert writers, the interrelated purposes of positioning and promoting one's work within a community of readers give shape to patterns in citation, rhetorical-organizational structuring, problem definitions, and stance expression (Hyland, 2000; MacDonald, 1987; Swales, 1990). For student writers and instructor-graders, the more immediate purposes of writing appear related to the display of critical thinking and engagement with course material (see, e.g., Bean, 2011). Expressing these qualities successfully may therefore require qualities of stance that, while contingent on course and assignment goals, are also shared across those contexts.

My co-author and I offered supporting evidence for this possibility in our large-scale corpus study of student academic prose (Aull & Lancaster, 2014). We found that, while first-year university writers used more boosting expressions (*certainly, it is clear that*) than hedging expressions (*perhaps, may*) when making claims, upper-level students did the opposite and across a wide range of disciplines. This tendency to hedge more frequently than boost has also been found to be a cross-disciplinary pattern among expert writers of published research articles (Hyland, 2005b). The fact, then, that undergraduate students across contexts are often expected to be “critical” in their coursework writing, combined with the finding that expression of discursiveness openness via hedges appears to be valued across fields, suggests the possibility of shared rhetorical expectations for expressing a critical stance at the undergraduate level.

### 1.2. Background and purpose of study

To examine this possibility, I used corpus techniques to analyze HG and LG papers written in two very different courses at a university in the United States Midwest: Economics 400 (Government Regulation of Industry) and Political Science 400 (20th Century Political Thought). Both courses (henceforth “Econ” and “PolTh”) were the subject of a three-year study of the impact of meta-reflective instructional interventions on students' thinking and writing in the disciplines. Prior publications have examined results from pre- and post-course surveys, student and instructor interviews, and students' written reflections on their writing (Meizlish, LaVaque-Manty, Silver, & Kaplan, 2013). This is the first study to examine the actual papers students

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