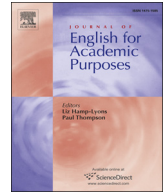


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Genre analysis: Considering the initial reviews



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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the initial reviews of John Swales' *Genre Analysis* (1990), in terms of the reactions of reviewers to that volume shortly after its appearance, the disciplinary values, as enacted by the reviewers in the historical moment of publication, and the disciplinary values and readability expectations which seem to inform the reviewers' observations.

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Reviews of a volume in the months and first years after its publication doubtless have their impact on library adoptions and sales. Early reviews are also windows into the past, giving the reactions of readers to that volume shortly after its appearance. In that sense, they tell us something of the *Zeitgeist* of the period in question, in terms of broader academic standards as well as specific disciplinary inclinations. Especially, in cases in which reviewers hail from different disciplinary backgrounds, they can reveal things shared and disparate across fields, in terms of what makes a volume valuable but also readable. Early reviews also tell us something, in retrospect, of reviewers' prescience—how clearly the early reviewers were able to see how a book would be received and used.

The book in question is, of course, *Genre Analysis*, and we now know that it turned out to have a remarkably extended shelf-life and also that the uptake by its many later readers has been surprisingly selective. On the one hand, the lengthy definition of genre has received much attention across disciplines. The criteria for discourse community have found their way into a surprising number of composition courses in the U.S.; and the CARS model for constructing introductions has achieved a certain canonical notoriety, even if its perceived use-value was mixed in the initial reviews. And the extension of move analysis into many discourses outside the academic world has gone further than perhaps even the original author could have hoped. On the other hand, the careful attempt to construct a clear concept of language-learning task has been almost entirely still-born, and there is little in the published record to suggest that the later sections on pedagogical applications have been adopted or adapted, though Swales' treatment of both received attention in the early reviews.

What follows is an examination of trends and predictions in the reviews, with particular attention to the disciplinary values and readability expectations which seem to inform the reviewers' observations. Of course, these values and expectations are enacted by these specific reviewers in particular ways, but there are some patterns and distinctions that prove interesting.

We have traced five published reviews, which are, in order of appearance, listed below:

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1. Richard Marius, Review in *The Journal of Advanced Composition*, 1991, 11 (2): 458–460
2. Ann M. Johns, Review in *English for Specific Purposes*, 1992, 11 (1): 83–85.3.
3. Paul Kusel, Review in *English Language Teaching Journal*, 1992, 46 (4): 378–380
4. Peter Master, Review in *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1992, 17 (3): 286–289.
5. Ingrid Pufahl, Book Notice in *Language*, 1993, 69 (1): 223–224.

According to Wikipedia (April, 2014), Richard Marius (1933–1999) was a noted scholar of the Reformation with major biographies of Martin Luther and Thomas More. He spent the last 20 years of his career as a Professor of English Literature at Harvard. For most of that time, he directed the required course in expository writing for incoming first-year students, where he emphasized clarity and directness, asking for revisions that used fewer and shorter words. It is presumably this last predilection that gave rise to a hostile review. But we might also note his disciplinary orientation, which figures rather prominently in his comments about the book's implications as well as its readability.

After asking some questions about what academic prose might be and how we might teach it, Marius concludes his opening paragraph with this sentence:

John M. Swales, Director of the English Language Institute and Professor of Linguistics at the University of Michigan, has addressed these questions in a book that is, alas, all but unreadable.

A little later he warms to his theme, which is rooted in disciplinary identities and generalizations:

But literature profs believe with equal conviction that today's crop of writing teachers are not humanists at all. Rather, they look like technicians, absorbed like engineers in the mechanics of language but attuned to none of its pleasures. I shudder to imagine the effect that Swales' book might have on anyone who loved English, for his graceless jargon can serve only to make the discipline of rhetoric look ridiculous to those who already lack faith in its practitioners.

The twice-mentioned "pleasures" of language appear key for Marius' criteria for the readability of a text, and it is clear he finds literary scholars and professors to be those with respect for said pleasures. Marius notes that Swales "makes the quite valid comment that the complexity of some ideas may require a writer to make heavy demands on readers," but for Marius, such demands are more palpable when accompanied by "pleasures." Marius' unspecified criteria for language "pleasures" is perhaps an interesting case in point for *Genre Analysis* and EAP, which aims to render more transparent what makes a text "good" or "readable" to a particular discourse community. One might accordingly wonder if Marius' review reveals that what appears to one literary scholar as an imposition is an EAP commitment to the (albeit technical) revelation of what seems to comprise readable (or pleasurable) academic prose.

Marius does offer a positive note, though it is adversatively prefaced: "In hacking my way through this jungle of obfuscation, I find pools of wisdom." He instances some of the work on genre, the variable contract between writers and readers, and the fact that writing introductions is difficult, but concludes that "none of this seems novel." While Swales would concede that there is some jargon in the book, perhaps particularly when the author discusses task and language acquisition, even a colleague in the English literature department commiserated with him on an "unnecessarily harsh review" (p.c.).

On this note, there are two aspects of Marius' review that may trace some of his conclusions to disciplinary expectations. The first concerns readability. Given that other reviews written by applied linguists offer precisely contrary terms like "readable," "pleasurable," and "lucid," the contrasts seem to suggest discipline-specific ideas about a book's readability and use-value. Of course, the sample of reviews here is too small for firm conclusions, but they display interesting contrasts about what constitutes clear prose to each reviewer. The second aspect concerns evidence. Marius reviews Swales' analysis of introductions in the following way: "Introductions, Swales thinks, are difficult. They serve both to define the discourse community to which a research article may be addressed, to grant the writer authority with that community, and to shape the problem that the writer will consider in the article itself." Marius' phrasing appears rather intentionally offhand, so perhaps that explains his use of "Swales thinks" rather than attention to Swales' systematic analysis of research articles that served as the basis for his conclusions. Marius' disinterest in the evidence for Swales' claims seems confirmed in his subsequent sentence: "None of this seems novel, and all of it might have been set down in clear prose with perhaps some entertaining anecdotal illustrations." The proposal that anecdotal illustrations would provide an equal or preferable basis for writing research seems potentially rooted in misunderstandings and adverse relations between U.S. literary studies and writing studies (Aull, 2015; Connors, 1997; Miller, 1991; Winterowd, 1998).

Ann Johns does not need any introduction to readers of this journal, except to point out that she is a friend of John Swales and to note that they worked closely for years co-editing *English for Specific Purposes*. In contrast to Marius, she finds the book to be "a pleasurable and instructive read." The book is praised for its scope, especially for its multidisciplinary discussion of genre, for its social constructivist view of ESP research and practice, and for its belief that "theory and research can and should lead to pedagogical application." One of her relatively few regrets is that, from her perspective, the examples of classroom application are all for rather advanced and sophisticated learners. While she notes that there is a strong focus on the research article and its introductory section in Part III, she only implies that the discussion of research genres is unbalanced. In contrast to Marius, she concludes her opening paragraph with "Through this new volume, then, Swales continues to provide intelligent, articulate and pedagogically based leadership to the ESP movement." In Johns' review, then, the book is a "pleasurable" read, and its use-value is especially rooted in its interdisciplinary treatment of genre and its synthesis of theory and pedagogy

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