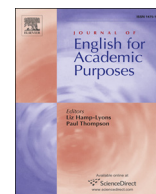


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Peeling the onion – A textual model of critical analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we draw on analysis of published research articles in biology and education to tease apart discourse patterns that meet the expectations of disciplines to go beyond 'mere description'. We distinguish four ways in which academic writing can be patterned into discourse: through description, analysis, persuasion and critique. While we recognise the need for students to move beyond description, we propose a layered model of academic writing development, which acknowledges that successful persuasive and critical writing depends upon the accumulation of knowledge developed through both description and analysis. From a pedagogic perspective, this model, which we refer to as 'The Onion', informs literacy educators and subject teachers to develop a spiral rather than hierarchical pathway for supporting students to generate successful academic genres.

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1. Introduction

A central concern shared by teachers of English for Academic Purposes has been to support students who are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) to produce written texts which are valued for demonstrating learning at tertiary level. Written assignments that meet the expectations of markers across disciplines are typically classified as analytical, presenting reasoned arguments, and engaging with and/or critiquing alternative points of view (Bennett, 2009; Chanock, 2000; Coffin, Hewings, & North, 2012; Wingate, 2012; Woodward-Kron, 2002, 2005). In resources developed to support students' writing, analytical and critical writing have traditionally been contrasted with less successful 'descriptive' writing. However, as is increasingly recognised by researchers of academic writing, dichotomies such as these tend to obscure the complexities inherent in terms such as analysis and critique (Chanock, 2000) and to oversimplify the epistemological and rhetorical issues involved in writing for academic audiences (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Lea & Street, 1998:159; Mauranen, 2003; Woodward-Kron, 2002). Despite efforts to make visible the genres valued in the academic domain and their relationship to learning in particular disciplines (e.g. Lockheart & Melles, 2011; Coffin, 2004, 2006; Hood, 2010), considerable ambiguity remains in the metalanguage used to identify their discourse patterns and in the descriptions of the relationships between them.

In this paper, we draw on analysis of academic writing from two related research and development projects conducted by educational researchers and teachers working with undergraduate and postgraduate EAL students in the fields of Biology and Language Education (Hao & Humphrey, 2012; Humphrey & Dreyfus, 2013; Humphrey & Hao, 2013) and on ongoing research¹

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(e.g. Jones, Gollin, Drury, & Economou, 1989) conducted at The University of Sydney Learning Centre (LC) to tease apart discourse patterns associated with successful academic writing. Focussing on patterns of language across extended written texts in two disciplines, we distinguish four ways in which language can be patterned into discourse at different levels: through description, analysis, persuasion and critique. The resulting model of academic writing, which has informed a range of teaching and learning materials and pedagogic practices in a range of services offered at the LC, uses the 'Onion' as a symbolic shorthand for the co-presence and interdependence of all four ways or functions of writing in successful academic discourse. The image of an onion captures the valued relationships of layering and dependency between these four functions in academic writing, but also at stake is their simultaneous deployment at different textual levels. From a pedagogic perspective, the 'Onion model' recognises the need for students to move beyond 'mere' description in demonstrating their learning in writing. However, we also argue that successful persuasive and critical writing depends upon the accumulation of knowledge presented through description and developed through analysis. Students do not leave the more fundamental functions behind as they become more competent but rather learn to use them strategically in achieving the more complex functions. The Onion model is designed to encourage literacy educators and subject teachers to develop a spiral rather than hierarchical pathway to support students in generating successful academic genres.

2. Theoretical foundation

The development of the Onion model is informed by an understanding that disciplinary knowledge in the sciences and to a large extent in the social sciences accumulates largely through subsuming, integrating and building on previous knowledge (Maton, 2014). As much of the knowledge at tertiary level is built and demonstrated through text, and particularly written text, this understanding highlights the importance of apprenticing, of building pathways which scaffold tertiary students into the valued learning and written discourse patterns in their discipline. The Onion model is thus also informed by linguistic theory in order to explain how texts unfold as particular configurations of linguistic patterns which shape and are shaped by their social contexts. Systemic functional linguistics, in particular its genre and register theory (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2007, 2008), offers a way of deconstructing an academic text in terms of its schematic structure, that is, in terms of how the social purpose of the text in context is achieved through functional stages. At the same time SFL's comprehensive descriptions of discourse semantic and lexico-grammatical systems offer a means of providing evidence for such functional staging. These descriptions are provided in terms of three metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal and textual – each associated with the three main aspects of context – field, tenor and mode. A stage can be identified by the particular configuration of linguistic choices from each system and where this shifts to a new configuration, a stage move is signalled. Table 1 below summarises some key linguistic patterns of academic discourse at the level of lexicogrammar (i.e. within the clause) and discourse semantics (i.e. across stretches of text). Those resources relevant to the analysis will be explored in the following sections.

In the application of SFL theory in discourse analysis, the unit of 'phase' has also proved useful for identifying patterns of discourse (Gregory & Malcolm, 1981; Martin & Rose, 2007). While the notion of phase as an intermediate unit of meaning between stage and clause has long been used within SFL and broader applied linguistic theories (e.g. Hoey, 1983; Jordan, 1984), Rose has developed a taxonomy of phase types for a range of genres, defining them in linguistic terms as 'waves of information carrying pulses of field and tenor' (Rose, 2007:188). Rose recognises smaller and larger segments at phase rank, including series of logically related phases forming 'macro-phases'. The unit of phase has been particularly useful in our analysis of discourse semantic patterns. It has allowed us to identify the four different functions identified in the Onion, in both smaller and larger units of composition. It has also revealed a fractal relationship between these functions, where each or all may be 'mirrored' at different scales (Rose, 2007:192).

Each of these four functions in the Onion, from the more basic 'description' to the more complex 'critique', has been explored to varying extents in linguistics and in pedagogy. In educational contexts at school level, 'description' has been identified as a fundamental genre in literary and factual apprenticing texts, distinguished by the absence of unfolding

Table 1
Linguistic systems and metafunctions.

	Ideational	Interpersonal	Textual
Discourse Semantics	<p>ideation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - patterns of lexis - relations of taxonomy & synonymy in lexical strings <p>external conjunction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - logical connection between events (addition comparison, sequence, cause) 	<p>appraisal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - types of attitude values - levels of intensification - types of intertextual positioning 	<p>identification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - introducing & tracking participants in reference chains <p>internal conjunction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - logical connection between parts of discourse <p>periodicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - information flow organised across text by scaffolding smaller units into a larger
Lexico-grammar	Transitivity	Mood, Modality, etc.	Theme and Information

Adapted from Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2007.

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