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Valued voices: Students' use of Engagement in argumentative history writing



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore rhetorical moves used by students in argumentative, analytical writing in a college-level world history course. Drawing on the system of ENGAGEMENT within the APPRAISAL framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics, we investigate differences between higher-graded and lower-graded essays in the combinations and patterns of resources used to expand and contract dialogic space while building an argument. The results show that while both higher-graded and lower-graded essays made use of some of the same moves, the higher-graded essays did so in a way that consistently furthered an argument. In addition, the higher-graded essays showed a recurring pattern of ENGAGEMENT resources used for including and interpreting source texts. These findings illustrate that beyond simply including ENGAGEMENT resources, students need to learn how to use these resources in purposeful and strategic ways.

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Introduction

We have learned a great deal about the experiences of linguistically and culturally diverse college students in writing classrooms and across the curriculum in the last 20 years (see the works of Hyland, 1996; Lee, 2010a, 2010b; Leki, 2007; Mahboob, 2013; Mahboob, Dreyfus, Humphrey, & Martin, 2010; North, 2005; Ravelli & Ellis, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004; Silva & Matsuda, 2001a, 2001b; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Sternglass, 1997; Woodward-Kron, 2002; Woodward-Kron, 2005; Zamel & Spack, 2004). However, the study of undergraduate student writing is still limited, despite the high stakes for students when faced with academic writing tasks. Much of college learning takes place through literacy experiences, especially through reading, and this learning is most often displayed through writing (Leki, 2007). Academic writing, in particular, can be daunting for students as writing expectations and demands vary across disciplines and genres (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In the present study, we investigate argumentative writing in a college-level history course, and examine the specific ways in which students acknowledge and incorporate multiple voices and perspectives using the APPRAISAL¹ framework (Martin & White, 2005) from Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) is a social theory of language that provides a framework for the contextualized analysis of student writing. Throughout their education, students are exposed to and perform a number of different types of writing in a variety of contexts. Christie and Derewianka (2008), in their work on writing development, show

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¹ Consistent with SFL conventions, names of systems within the APPRAISAL framework are written in capital letters.

that as students progress from elementary to secondary school, the topics of study change from the familiar and everyday to the generalized and abstract, and writing tasks change from description to reflection and argumentation. [Martin \(1989\)](#) characterizes argumentative, analytical texts by the need to persuade the audience to a certain intellectual position on a particular issue, arguing for the credibility of a well-formulated claim or thesis. In college, the argumentative, analytical essay is one of the most common genres, and represents “undergraduates’ induction or possibly assimilation into a student role and often has a considerable bearing upon relative success or failure in that role” ([Wu & Allison, 2005](#), p. 106).

Within the school subject of history, a range of genres has been identified along a developmental continuum ([Coffin, 2002, 2004; Eggins, Wignell, & Martin, 1993](#)). Students learn initially to write story-like historical recounts, which typically contain less-complex descriptions of linear cause-and-effect relationships. Later, students develop toward writing abstract historical arguments about historical figures and events, which incorporate complex interrelationships among ideas. Argumentative, analytical writing is one of the most prominent types of writing in college-level history courses, and involves selecting facts, and arranging, interpreting, and generalizing across these facts in order to create meaning ([Eggins et al., 1993](#)), allowing many choices for the author to make in the construction of an argument.

SFL-based studies of analytical, argumentative history essays have identified a number of linguistic and rhetorical features of this genre. These include strategic use of conjunctive relations, nominalizations, and organization through connections between macro-Themes and hyper-Themes ([de Oliveira, 2011; Eggins et al., 1993; Martin, 1992; Martin, 2002; Veel & Coffin, 1996](#)). In addition, evaluation has been found to be one of the major components of analytical, argumentative history writing. Evaluation allows authors to create interpretations of events, people, and ideas, and to position their own viewpoint in relation to those of others. [Martin, Maton, and Matruglio \(2010\)](#) argue that one of the greatest challenges for students is to learn to go beyond telling stories about the past, to making their own evaluations and interpretations of the past in “uncommonsense” ways (p. 441). Similarly, [Coffin \(1997\)](#) found that as students move from narrative history genres to argument, there is a change from predominant use of *recorder voice*, in which the author presents information as factual without evaluation or interpretation, to increasing use of *interpreter voice*, in which the author evaluates behaviors. [Martin \(2002, 2003b\)](#), however, points out that argument genres include fluctuations between these voices in order to present historical information as factual while interpreting that information using evaluations.

Within SFL, the APPRAISAL system offers a systematic framework for investigating evaluation ([Martin & White, 2005](#)). APPRAISAL consists of three main subsystems reflecting the choices an author can make in terms of how they appraise, grade, and give value to social experiences. The ATTITUDE subsystem concerns appraisals of people and things, and emotional/affectual responses toward participants and processes. The GRADUATION subsystem adjusts the force or focus of these evaluations. Finally, the ENGAGEMENT subsystem positions the author’s voice in relation to others’ voices.

There have been a number of studies of how APPRAISAL resources are deployed in history genres. [Coffin \(2006\)](#) concluded that ATTITUDE plays an important role in history writing, with narrative genres involving evaluation of individual human participants, and expository genres involving evaluation of processes and their historical significance. Coffin also found that analytical history genres increasingly make evaluations of historical significance, employing the GRADUATION system. Similarly, [de Oliveira \(2011\)](#) observed that in expository genres, students increasingly used the resources of APPRECIATION to present negative and positive assessments, and GRADUATION resources (e.g., adverbs) to increase or decrease the intensity of these evaluations. Although these studies have shed light onto the use of ATTITUDE and GRADUATION in history writing, there has been little work on the role of ENGAGEMENT, despite the fact that the resources writers use for ENGAGEMENT are particularly important for academic argumentation.

Academic arguers must make claims against a background of already-existing perspectives, and the analysis of ENGAGEMENT resources can help us understand how successful academic writers create a balance between introducing their own perspective, acknowledging the existence of other perspectives, and effectively estimating what their audience’s assumed perspective will be. Following [Bakhtin \(1981\)](#), [Martin and White \(2005\)](#) describe construal of voice in text as either monoglossic (single-voiced) or heteroglossic (multiple-voiced). When writers use resources for monoglossic propositions, such as bare assertions or presuppositions, they are expressing no room for alternative points of view and projecting complete agreement on the part of the audience. However, when they use resources for heteroglossic propositions, they are acknowledging the possibility of other perspectives. Heteroglossic resources can either be dialogically expansive (e.g., reported speech or modalized verbs), acknowledging or inviting differing perspectives, or they can be dialogically contractive (e.g., negotiations or explicit proclamations), refuting opponents while still keeping a specific viewpoint in play. The resources a writer uses indicate how he anticipates the audience will view the proposition, as “novel, problematic or contentious, or as one which is likely to be questioned, resisted or rejected” ([Martin & White, 2005](#), p. 93).

Recognition and inclusion of multiple voices plays an especially important role in history writing. Different from other disciplines, such as science, history writing has a more open structure in that static historical events and figures are given fluid interpretations based on the insights of the interpreting author at the point in time when the interpretation is made ([Halldén, 1997](#)). Because of this, expert history writers define texts by their authors, whereas novice history writers view history as a collection of information without considering the author’s voice ([Halldén, 1998; Wineburg, 1991](#), cited in [Hewings & North, 2006](#)). Nonetheless, the existence of multiple possible interpretations of history is typically not taught in history courses, and is often not represented in history textbooks ([Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Perfetti, 1994](#)).

Given the importance of recognizing multiple voices, the ENGAGEMENT framework is a profitable approach to analyzing history writing, one which only a few scholars have taken. [Coffin \(2006\)](#) notes that as students progress toward writing analytical genres, there is increased negotiation of alternative voices and acknowledgment of similar and opposing

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