



What is a research article?: Genre variability and data selection in genre research



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ABSTRACT

The written forms of the academic community, particularly the research article, are a frequent focus of genre research. Yet the criteria used to select “research articles” from among the different text types published in scholarly journals are not always made apparent. We argue that an elastic yet operational set of criteria for identifying the “research article” is both necessary and possible, and we offer a summary of our own process for developing such criteria in a project focused on the theory-practice tension in academic research in education. While genre theory’s interest in variability may make researchers wary of setting boundaries, defining a prestige knowledge-making genre like the “research article” is not just methodologically but also politically significant. In unpacking tacit assumptions about what we select as data we become more aware not just of sampling biases but of which forms of knowledge we legitimate and exclude.

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Genre theory explores the recurrent discursive forms through which communities constitute themselves. The written forms of the academic community, particularly the research article, are a frequent focus for genre theorists. Yet, for all that is known about the typical linguistic features of research articles—and there is a wealth of knowledge, particularly in EAP/ESP, where Swales’ (1990) work has been foundational—the criteria researchers have used to select “research articles” from among the different text types published in scholarly journals are not always made apparent.

Of course, like all genres, the research article is only a “relatively stable” entity (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60), not a fixed form. This contention is amply borne out in empirical investigations; the conventions that shape and constrain the research article vary across disciplines (notable here is extensive work by Hyland (2004)) as well as over time (book length studies include Bazerman (1988) and Gross, Harmon & Reidy (2002)). Precisely because of this variability, data sampling for genre research requires a degree of explicitness and at least temporary fixity. While in everyday usage most genres are readily recognizable despite variations in their form and content, categorizing scholarly genres for research purposes demands more than commonsense knowledge.

In this paper, we propose that an elastic yet operational, “stable-enough-for-now” (Schryer, 1993, p. 229) set of criteria for identifying the “research article” is both necessary and possible in genre research. We offer a summary of our own process for developing such criteria in a project focused on the theory-practice tension in academic research in education. The criteria themselves are not intended as definitive, of course, but we believe they offer a sound and useful starting point for other inquiries. We also discuss methodological and political implications of our work for studies of knowledge-making genres. In particular, we stress the importance of thinking through and laying out explicitly the parameters of genres under study. This is

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true even of genres like the research article, with which we assume our readers will be very familiar. In fact, we argue it is particularly true of such “familiar” genres, because defining a knowledge-making genre is not just a methodological practice but also a political one. In unpacking tacit assumptions about what we select as data in our studies we become more aware not just of sampling biases but of which forms of knowledge we frame as legitimate and which forms we exclude.

1. Genre sampling in writing research

Discussion of sampling is relatively limited in the genre and writing studies literature. Possibly, this is attributable to Bhatia's notion of “generic integrity” (2001, p. 88). If, as he claims, “the most important aspect of a genre is that it is recognizable, sufficiently standardized and is based on a set of mutually accessible conventions” (2001, p. 88), then it may be that the identification of particular genres is simply taken for granted. As we have already noted above, this is, of course, how genre operates in the everyday—more or less by tacit recognition. Yet, Bazerman and Prior (2004) is one of few scholars to point out that, however tempting this commonsense foundation for identifying genres may be, it is methodologically problematic to work on this basis alone. He offers a set of useful approaches to “go beyond the cataloging of features of genres that we already know” (p. 324), but he does not offer advice on working with boundaries, that is, on how to determine whether or not a given text represents the particular genre being studied. In a section headed “What Is a Genre and How Do You Know One?” he acknowledges that “there is no magic equation to determine what gives you adequate evidence of a genre” (p. 327). Yet, his suggestion to collect samples to “the point of diminishing returns, plus a couple more,” (p. 327) while sound in principle, may not always be workable and still leaves the problem of genre definition unaddressed.

Peck MacDonald (2002) suggests that researchers should “read or skim broadly in trying to develop a sense of what is representative” (p. 116). Here again, however, the advice to work inductively is sensible but ultimately not enough to be useful in setting parameters, particularly when accompanied by the broad admonition to avoid “atypical articles” (p. 117). (What constitutes typical and atypical articles? And how might one recognize exemplars of either category?) Bhatia (2004) advises ensuring “that one's criteria for deciding whether a text belongs to a specific genre are clearly stated” (p. 164). He adds, helpfully but without much elaboration, that a genre's definition may be based on its communicative purposes, its situational context, distinctive textual characteristics, or a combination of these.

In the absence of ready direction from more theoretical discussions of genre sampling in writing studies, we looked at other sources that might provide guidance. We searched for existing corpora of research articles and found The Corpus of Research Articles (CRA), maintained by the Research Centre for Professional Communication at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The CRA is sizable—5,609,407-words, with articles from high impact factor-journals in 39 disciplines—but we found no documentation indicating how actual research articles were selected. We also looked for selection criteria in empirical studies of the research article genre. Here, we found a predominance of studies about specific elements of the research article rather than holistic analyses of the research article per se. We also found that investigations—of both the research article and its elements—seem to operate with a common-sense notion of the genre, even as they look for contextual variation. The research article genre is rarely defined, even in fields where it is far less conventionalized than in the “hard” sciences. One notable exception is Gray's (2015) study of linguistic variation within the research article, in which the author draws on a taxonomy of over-arching article types (empirical, theoretical and evaluative) and sub-types to build a corpus of articles across six disciplines and three registers. While her study differs in aim from ours, it was useful to us in modeling an inductive and systematic approach to rendering selection criteria for articles explicit.

In sum, just as we had initially expected to do in our own study, most authors working with a corpus of research articles tend to describe how they selected particular journals but not how they selected research articles. Most frequently, the selection of research articles is described as “random.” Occasionally, methods sections specify criteria for choosing from among research articles. For instance, selection is sometimes restricted to reports of certain types of studies (for example, Sheldon, 2011) or single-authored papers (for example, Molino, 2010). However, few studies set out criteria for distinguishing research articles from other types of content, and those that do commonly employ the IMRD framework as an identifier (for example, Valipouri & Nassaji, 2013; Martinez, Beck, & Panza, 2009). Yet, in our project, the IMRD structure presented challenges as a basis for data selection. Before we move on to discuss this challenge (as well as the complications involved in our attempt to draw on editorial headings and placement as a guide for selection) we describe the project itself and our process for selecting journals.

2. The larger project: “Scholarly and practical orientations in education research articles: a genre-based study”

This paper reports on sampling issues that arose in a larger project examining how scholars' differing levels of commitment to theory and practice are realized in the genre of the research article.¹ More specifically, the project looks at research articles from three contrasting subfields of education, namely health professions education (HPE), early childhood education (ECE), and philosophy of education (P of E). The relationship between research for understanding and research for application has been the subject of longstanding discussion, but its discursive aspects have received little attention. Given that the research article is both one of the primary outputs of research activity (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Swales, 1990) and a major focus in writing studies, we sought to understand better the part this genre plays in constituting the theory-practice relationship. As an applied field with a large number of contrasting subfields, education makes a good site for this exploration of the research article. Indeed, the

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