Local Assessment: Using Genre Analysis to Validate Directed Self-Placement

Grounded in the principle that writing assessment should be locally developed and controlled, this article describes a study that contextualizes and validates the decisions that students make in the modified Directed Self-Placement (DSP) process used at the University of Michigan. The authors present results of a detailed text analysis of students’ DSP essays, showing key differences between the writing of students who self-selected into a mainstream first-year writing course and that of students who self-selected into a preparatory course. Using both rhetorical move analysis and corpus-based text analysis, the examination provides information that can, in addition to validating student decisions, equip students with a rhetorically reflexive awareness of genre and offer an alternative to externally imposed writing assessment.

Early on a sweltering July day, Maria arrives at the University of Michigan and plunges into three days of orientation. During the afternoon of the second day, she meets with an academic adviser and makes one of her first decisions as a college student: enroll directly in first-year writing (FYW) or enroll first in a credit-bearing preparatory course (PREP). Before she has attended a single session of a college writing class, Maria has to decide: FYW or PREP. But what does Maria know about college-level writing? She has answered eight questions about her past reading and writing experiences, and her responses generated a recommendation that she can discuss during her twenty-minute meeting with...
an adviser. She has had an opportunity to read the university’s descriptions of the first-year writing courses, and she may have gotten advice from a peer or an older sibling. And yet, if Maria feels uncertain about what constitutes “college-level writing,” could we blame her?

Any concerns that Maria might have about her placement decision are mirrored by concerns of writing teachers and administrators about the validity of their placement procedures. To be sure, writing assessment programs like the Directed Self-Placement (DSP) process described above meet the immediate need of sorting students into writing courses. And they have some features of good writing assessment: they are locally based and affirm student agency in choosing a first writing course. If they are to demonstrate the validity of the student’s choice, however, they must connect the writer to her or his writing by showing differences in the writing of students who have selected FYW and PREP. Peggy O’Neill suggests that “[w]riting assessment functions as a frame (a structure) and a framing process (an activity) because it shapes our understanding of writing” (442). Establishing the validity of a given assessment, then, requires what Michael T. Kane calls interpretive and validity arguments. The interpretive argument explains “the network of inferences and assumptions leading from the observed performances to the conclusions and decisions based on the performances” (23), and the validity argument evaluates the interpretive argument. In the case of writing placement, interpretive and validity arguments lead, via complex analysis, to an articulation of the positive and negative consequences of placement decisions.

This kind of analysis addresses Chris W. Gallagher’s goal of altering “the current assessment scene in ways that reject stakeholder theory and assert the primary agency of faculty and students in education and educational assessment” (461). It also addresses present dangers: “When policymakers, university administrators, and testing companies—instead of knowledgeable WPAs and faculty members—make decisions about writing assessment, we risk losing the ability to define our own field as well as make decisions about our programs and students” (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 4).

In this essay, we describe how the Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan studied, modified, and then investigated further its DSP process. We include a number of contextual details, not because we imagine ours as a model to emulate, but because context is a crucial part of assessment, and by offering a rich description we hope to suggest factors that, following Brian Huot’s principle of assessment being “developed and controlled
locally” (“Toward” 552), colleagues in other contexts might consider. The first step in examining the DSP process was a validity study that showed that the construct of writing represented in the DSP questions did not align well with that of first-year writing. This study further showed that DSP scores did not show consistency across time and various populations of students, and, especially, that placements did not align well with other data about students and their performances as writers (Gere, Aull, Green, and Porter). These findings led to further investigations, conversations, and, especially, articulations of theoretical frameworks to guide our modification and study of the DSP process we had inherited.

After articulating principles for interrogating placement, contributing to the writing program, and defining “college-level writing,” this essay offers evidence that contextualizes and validates the placement decisions students are making; it articulates what the writing program values as “college-level writing,” and contributes to program development. Considered in this way, placement procedures can support students with a valid composition placement, articulate the local definition of “college-level writing,” and inform the continuing development of the writing program.

**Guiding Principles**

To meet our short-term need of determining the appropriateness of the choices students made in the DSP process and our longer-term need of defining college-level writing for those in and beyond the writing program and, ultimately, improving the writing program, we turned to Kane’s description of validation as an examination of the “network of inferences and assumptions leading from observed performances to the conclusions and decisions based on the performances” (23). In this view validity is an attribute not of tests but of results; results are deemed valid or invalid according to the decisions they engender (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 45). Huot explains the importance of seeing validity in terms of what results from assessment:

*Validity centers not on the measurement itself but on the “adequacy” of the decision and “actions” that are taken based on the assessment. . . . Information about decisions to be made and actions to be taken need to be supplied for each*
use of the assessment, negating not only a simple declaration of validity for a specific type of assessment, but introducing the necessity of supplying empirical and theoretical evidence of validity for specific environments, populations, and curricula. (“(Re)Articulating” 50)

Thus, validity is locally constructed from the empirical evidence of assessment results and the theoretical frameworks that articulate what the program values in writing (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 45). In argument we connect evidence and a theoretical framework, so “validity inquiry involves constructing a sound argument to support the interpretation and use of test scores from both theoretical and empirical evidence” (46). Open to different interpretations, additional evidence, and shifts in theoretical foundations, these arguments (and the decisions and actions that depend on them) create a “feedback loop” (46) that fosters regular re-examination of assessment practices.

Accepting Huot’s assertion that “the validity of a test must include a recognizable and supportable theoretical foundation” (“(Re)Articulating” 93), we evaluated the University of Michigan’s 1998–2008 DSP process using a combination of widely accepted principles for writing assessment, including that the process be “site-based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically based, accessible, and theoretically consistent” (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 57). We found that this DSP program enacted two of the six principles of writing assessment that O’Neill, Moore, and Huot articulate: it was site-based in that the program directed students’ attention to the characteristics of the two options for writing courses, and it was locally controlled in that students made the final decision about their writing course in the context of course descriptions and a recommendation based on their answers to questions. However, we also found that the DSP questions directed student attention to past literacy experiences rather than the content of the university’s writing program (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 57). Because the DSP questions did not direct students to consider “recognizable and supportable rhetorical principles,” the placement program could not claim to be rhetorically based (57). Because the program did not make “procedures, criteria, rationales, samples and results” available to students as they were making their placement decision, the program could not claim to be accessible (57). Because the construct of writing in the DSP questions was unrelated to the construct of writing in FYW, the program could not claim to be theoretically coherent. We also considered principles specific to DSP, such as features of the DSP process articulated by Ed Jones: “1) students evaluate their own abilities in relation to criteria provided by the school, 2) students
receive information that contextualizes their self-assessment in relation to writing program requirements, 3) students perform actual reading and writing tasks from the first-year curriculum and reflect on their performance, 4) students enter into dialogue with those knowledgeable about first-year writing requirements, and 5) students are granted autonomy in the decision-making process” (57). This led us to append the concept of student agency to the more general principles of assessment.

The modified DSP process, launched in 2009, included features designed to increase the information available to students, to align it more directly with university writing courses, and to make it more rhetorically based. Drawing on the iMOAT system developed by Les Perelman at MIT, we designed a reading/writing measure similar to the PTT model described by Emily Isaacs and Catherine Keohane.2

This modified DSP process, like its predecessor, positioned students as decision makers who choose between the first-year writing course that satisfies a university requirement (FYW) and a developmental course (PREP). After completing the DSP essay, students were required to answer questions that asked them to reflect on the reading and writing process they had just completed. Because the writing task was aligned with the genres students would confront in both FYW and PREP—text-based arguments in which students use source texts to formulate and develop a stance (see next section)—the questions added another layer of contextualizing to the DSP process. Designing these questions took on special importance because our study of the 1998–2008 DSP showed that in 2006–2008 the Sweetland Center for Writing altered the DSP questions to address administrative concerns about the high percentage of students enrolling in PREP. Altering the DSP questions led to a decline in PREP recommendations and, not surprisingly, enrollments. Awareness of how easily political and economic concerns could trump pedagogical ones heightened our attention to the questions.

Analysis of these changes showed that the percentage of students who followed the DSP recommendation increased dramatically, from 25% in 2008 to 88% in 2009, and enrollment in PREP expanded to 133 students, a 90% increase. Still, the total of 254 students enrolled in PREP was only 4% of the 6,058 first-year students, and according to the data we gathered, those who enrolled were the students most in need of PREP. These changes indicated that the modified DSP was playing a role in student decision making, whereas a significant number of students seemed to ignore the earlier version. In surveys
students indicated that their choice of writing course was influenced in equal measure by writing the essay and talking with academic peer advisers (2.8 on a 4.0 scale).\(^3\) Of all the other factors, only talking with an academic adviser (3.2) and confidence in their own writing ability (3.6) ranked higher. Furthermore, both students and instructors who responded to surveys during the semester indicated that the placement was appropriate.\(^4\)

While these findings were gratifying, we recognized their limitations. The self-reported data did not provide any explanation of why the placement was appropriate. Nor did it tell us anything about the writing abilities of students in FYW or PREP.

Even if we could say that overall the modified DSP helped students make better placement choices, we could not make any valid claims about what “college writing” means at the University of Michigan, nor could we offer information that would help improve the writing program. This led us to the second theoretical principle guiding our modification of the DSP, assuring that assessment is shaped by substantial and current knowledge of the field: “Research into language and literacy, which has grown exponentially over the last half-century and given rise to new specialties within linguistics and education, has produced critical information about how language and literacy functions and circulates, as well as how people learn to read and write” (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 39). Three bodies of relatively recent research inform our approach to assessment.

Research on writing prompts or assignments is the first area that informs our work on assessment. Often underconceptualized by those who create them, assignments play a significant role in students’ ability to perform well on a given writing task and therefore merit special attention in assessment. Many assignments position the student as a novice who is being asked to perform by an expert. Consequently, many students do not understand what is expected of them. This is particularly true for first-year students because, while they have had writing assignments in high school, college writing assignments often contain unstated assumptions and use language that is unfamiliar to them. A term like essay, for example, can, as Shirley Brice Heath has noted, be
opaque to many students. Although argument is commonly used to describe many college writing assignments, Christopher R. Wolfe’s research identified a number of different kinds of argument—thesis-driven, text analysis, empirical, decision-based, proposal, short answer, and compound. Each of these variations assumes something different about what counts as evidence, what stance the writer should take, and what marks success. Furthermore, the genres of assignments vary with rhetorical contexts: “the functions and audiences for genres, their social exigencies, and how they vary from discipline to discipline” all add to the complexity (Melzer 251–52). Not surprisingly, one of the difficulties students encounter is interpreting what a given assignment is asking them to do. Many students “read their writing assignment without understanding the kind of performance they are expected to enact” (Clark 5). Other key factors include students’ knowledge about the topic as well as their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Murphy and Yancey).

The second area that informs our approach to assessment is genre studies. The multiple articulations of genre studies offer a space for incorporating language into a fuller understanding of rhetoric. Rhetorical genre studies, the strand of genre studies most familiar to compositionists, emerged in the wake of Carolyn R. Miller’s enunciation of genre as social action. In Miller’s terms, “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (“Genre” 151). As such, genre occupies a middle ground between linguistic processes and the culture that shapes and is shaped by these processes (Miller, “Rhetorical” 68–69). For the first-year student, entering the largely unfamiliar culture of the university, genre takes on particular importance because, as Michael Carter notes, related genres play a role in “constituting complex social formations” (393). Elaborated by Amy Devitt and by Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, among others, this approach to genre recasts rhetorical invention as an interaction between writer and genre, in which the genre is a dynamic, rhetorical force rather than a constraining, fixed form—but still one that is realized through recurring, typified features and actions. This emphasis on genre as dynamic and flexible has the potential to shift attention to the ways that writers deploy language in communicative moves that accomplish particular rhetorical purposes.

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Although rhetoric-composition genre scholars historically have focused more on social purposes and communities as they are enacted via genres, Devitt suggests that rhetorical genre studies provokes questions and ideas that pave the way for a reintegration of both language and context-based approaches to writing (“Written Language”). The resulting approach would portray genre as contextual and dynamic, making visible powerful interrelationships of rhetoric and language. Scholarship in rhetorical genre studies, combined with analytic tools and insights from linguistic approaches to genre studies, challenges us to think about writing assessment in a new way, one that can provide “hard evidence” of a student’s abilities to write an admissions essay while keeping in focus the diversity of textual realizations that emerge from a) the student-writers’ varying understandings of the meso-level rhetorical actions that may accomplish the essay’s overarching rhetorical purpose, and b) their varying control of the micro-level linguistic resources that realize those actions textually.

By “meso-level rhetorical actions” we mean the collections of communicative purposes in smaller sections of a text—larger than the sentence—that together construct the text’s overall pragmatic value as a message. These rhetorical actions are akin to Carolyn Miller’s “intermediate forms or strategies” or “sequences of messages which have a starting and a stopping point” that constitute genres (161). This intermediate level of analysis (between sentence-level features and the text) affords an examination of writers’ rhetorical purposes below the level of the text, which is an important endeavor in genre studies (162). Interestingly, this line of analysis has not been pursued by scholars working in what Sunny Hyon has called the rhetorical school of genre studies. Instead, we find that the concept of “move” as developed in the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) school of genre studies is useful for looking at meso-level rhetorical actions.

Rhetorical moves have been defined as discursive units or “rhetorical instruments that realize a sub-set of specific communicative purposes associated with a genre” (Bhatia, “Conceptual” 84). Rhetorical move analysis has been used to describe organizational patterns in genres according to their rhetorical purpose (e.g., Swales, “Genre”; Bhatia, “Analysing”; “Conceptual”; Thompson), and it can be adapted to many local contexts and genres. For our purposes, move analysis can demonstrate how students pattern their DSP essays as a series of rhetorical actions, revealing variation in the writing of differently placed groups of students. Coupled with a close examination of recurring lexicogrammatical choices—the micro-level linguistic resources mentioned above—move analysis can illustrate how students accomplish meso- and micro-rhetorical maneuvers.
Accordingly, the third analytic approach that informs our assessment is ESP corpus-based research on the specific details of language in academic discourse (e.g., Hyland, “Disciplinary”; “Stance”). This approach has received little attention in composition studies, which has remained relatively isolated from new theories and methods in language study, including functional approaches to language use and computer-assisted methods of analysis, since the 1960s when Christensen’s “new rhetoric” that focused on sentence-level choices in writing was trumped by Moffett’s advocacy for an expressivist focus. As MacDonald and Soliday have both noted, compositionists can now draw on a wealth of work in various subfields of linguistics to examine specific ways that language achieves rhetorical purposes.

Our approach to writing assessment, then, is based on research on assignments for writing, theoretical insights from rhetorical genre studies, and text-analytic methods used in ESP approaches to genre analysis. It provides information about how writing assignments contribute to assessments, how language and rhetorical moves distinguish more and less successful writing, and how these considerations and methods help define what “college writing” means in a specific context. This analysis can inform the ongoing development of the writing program, creating closer linkage between assessment and instruction.

**The Writing Prompt**

In developing the prompt, we considered several local context dimensions. Students who matriculate at the University of Michigan are very high-achieving and confident. Their SAT scores average 1330 (ACT, 29); they have taken an average of 2.5 AP courses for which they receive an average of 8 credits; and they are typically at the top of their high school class. There are a small number of students with less impressive academic credentials. We have found that less able pre-2008 students who didn’t take PREP did not do significantly less well than other students in FYW, but their grades in required upper level writing courses were significantly (in the statistical sense) lower than their peers’. This, combined with the finding that a substantial number of students in the low-performing group were not enrolling in PREP, convinced us that these students needed a simulation of college writing against which they could evaluate their own skills, especially since anecdotal reports indicated that many of the less
able writers—perhaps because they had been accepted at the University of Michigan—thought they were very well prepared for college writing.

The locally produced *Teaching First-Year Writing: A Guide for New Instructors of English 124-125* lists the following learning goals: 1) to produce complex, analytic, well-supported arguments that matter in academic contexts; 2) to read, summarize, analyze, and synthesize complex texts purposefully in order to generate and support writing; 3) to demonstrate an awareness of the strategies that writers use in different rhetorical situations; 4) to develop flexible strategies for organizing, revising, editing, and proofreading writing of varying lengths to improve development of ideas and appropriateness of expressions; 5) to collaborate with peers and the instructor to define revision strategies for particular pieces of writing, to set goals for improving writing, and to devise effective plans for achieving those goals. Our surveys of and interviews with faculty confirmed that well-supported arguments based on reading were the most highly prized form of writing, and this led to the decision to create a prompt that required what Wolfe describes as a text-based argument. We were also guided by the research of Melzer and of Murphy and Yancey to make the terms and requirements of the assignment as explicit as possible. Furthermore, by presenting students with an article to read along with a writing assignment and questions about the entire experience, we sought to address the ethical mandate, articulated by Schendel and O’Neill, to create a context in which students could perform and then evaluate their experience of writing, and, according to insights from genre studies, these experiences are genre- and task-based according to expectations of the local context.

Accordingly, we asked incoming students to read Malcolm Gladwell’s essay “Most Likely to Succeed” and respond to the following prompt: “Analyze Gladwell’s proposal on how to select and retain teachers in America and argue for or against his proposal using evidence from the article.” Context was provided by further instructions:

Write a 1000–1250 word academic essay in response to this prompt. By academic essay, we mean an essay in which you clearly articulate a position and support that position using evidence. Your essay should include the following features:

1. **Focus**: your essay should be developed around a clear central thesis or argument, integrating your own views with material from the article.

2. **Structure**: your essay should be clearly organized in a way that elaborates on and supports your central thesis. Individual paragraphs should be cohesive, and your reader should be able to follow the logical progression of your ideas from one paragraph to the next.
Students were also encouraged to draft and revise their essays, taking as much time as they wished before their orientation date.

Writing an evidence-based argument in response to a prompt like this requires not just arguing for one’s own opinion, but also identifying important propositions in the reading and then summarizing, analyzing, evaluating, and arguing for or against those propositions by using textual and other sources of evidence. Constructing such an argument also requires control of the necessary discursive resources for building an effective argumentative stance. As Soliday explains, stance-taking in the context of academic essay writing is a process of establishing a particular “relationship to evidence and to readers” (69) and of “achieving authority to speak about evidence” (11). Stance-taking, which is enacted through particular word- and phrase-level choices, accomplishes important rhetorical effects that can be identified by quantitative measures (Barton; Biber; Hyland, “Stance”).

**Essay Analysis**

Our goal of understanding more fully what rhetorical moves students make to construct and sustain an argumentative stance led us to combine rhetorical move analysis with analysis of the lexical and grammatical choices with which students accomplished these moves in their essays. This led us to corpus linguistics, an approach that brings together a corpus or collection of texts with a concordance or software program that lists commonly occurring word and phrase combinations that are often impossible to identify from qualitative analysis of whole texts. In our case, the student DSP essays constitute the corpus, and AntConc, a free online software program, serves as the concordancer. This combination of analytic approaches could, we reasoned, provide both deeper insight into what constitutes “college writing” in this context and instructional mandates for improving the writing program.

We divided the placement essays into two groups, one of essays written by students who selected FYW, and one of essays written by students who chose to enroll in PREP. We analyzed the introductory paragraphs of the essays because research (Hyland “Genre”; “Disciplinary”; Bhatia and Giotti; Swales, “Genre”) indicates that evidence-based arguments by professionals usually establish a stance in the introductory section, often the first several paragraphs. Although
Although we grounded our work in the research on rhetorical and ESP genre studies, we wanted to create categories of rhetorical moves based on the students’ own language use as evident in the corpus of essays. Our analysis followed closely the move analysis methodology outlined by Thomas Upton and Mary Ann Cohen. It included several rounds of joint coding of a small, randomized sample of both PREP and FYW essays. This served to develop and refine categories and definitions of moves. Separate coding of a large randomized sample of PREP and FYW essays did not proceed before a 90% inter-rater reliability had been reached during joint coding. Through this process we determined that the FYW and PREP essay introductions revealed three regularly occurring rhetorical moves: Establishing a Background, Reviewing the Article, and Taking a Stand, exemplified below. We also did a subjective rating, reading and ranking each essay introduction holistically as strong, average, or weak.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moves</th>
<th>Rhetorical Purpose</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing a Background</td>
<td>Orient the reader to the concerns of the source text by providing background information or raising questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(non-prototypical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing the Article</td>
<td>Construct a shared context with the reader by reviewing the article under analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(prototypical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Review-Summary</td>
<td>Offers a neutral summary of Gladwell’s proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Review-Evaluation</td>
<td>Offers an evaluative summary of Gladwell’s proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a Stand</td>
<td>States either an acceptance or rejection of the argument(s) of the source text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(prototypical)</td>
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The Review and Stand moves were present in all the essays that our subjective rating identified as strong, but some of these strong essays didn’t include the Background move. Therefore, we came to view the Background move as optional, and the Review and Stand moves as “prototypical” of the introduction of our DSP essay genre. Accordingly, essays including the Review and Stand moves were coded “Prototypical,” and essays not including one of these moves...
were coded “Non-Prototypical,” but a Prototypical introduction could include other moves besides Review and Stand.

After sampling 20% of the introductions in FYW and PREP, we coded the resulting 598 FYW introductions and 58 PREP introductions. We found that 73.2% of FYW writers used prototypical moves in their introductions while only 54.2% of PREP writers did so. This finding added strength to validity claims for the modified DSP process since we could see that students less able to fulfill the expectations of the prompt had enrolled in PREP.

Students made these three rhetorical moves in a wide variety of ways, both in terms of lexical and grammatical choices and move sequence: while many of the introductions followed a Background-Review-Stand sequencing strategy, many others began with the Stand and then referred back to the source text, either as justification for the Stand or simply a “delayed” review. As a result of these and other differences, students displayed a wide variety of styles and “voices” in the essays, even while responding to the same assigned reading. In the sections below, we explain the three moves in some detail. Appendix A shows examples of two fully coded introductions.

**Establishing a Background**

This move informs readers about the topics in the source text, which include US schools, teachers’ importance, and hiring procedures. Students most commonly use topic generalizations to enact the background move (Example 1), but also rhetorical questions (2), and narrating personal experiences (3).

1. *What becomes clear to every student at some point in their school career is that a teacher has the greatest impact over the interest a subject holds.*

2. *In an era of progressive ideas and forward thinking, should one revert back to the common mode of selection based on factors that have been proven to foretell nothing? Should one continue to be blissfully ignorant about the most effective way to select those who will shape the minds of our future leaders?*

3. *As a recently graduated, college bound student, I have had the opportunity to reflect upon my many high school teachers and analyze their effectiveness in transferring their knowledge to me. What I find during these moments of reflection is that very few teachers have the passion for teaching that is so important in this profession.*
Reviewing the Source Text

The Review move consists of either a neutral summary (Review-Summary) or an evaluation (Review-Evaluation) of Gladwell’s proposal. The Review move constructs a shared context with the imagined reader by detailing the goals and arguments of Gladwell’s essay before proceeding to take a stand toward these arguments.

Review-Summary moves varied widely in length. The lengthier reviewsummaries tend to provide a detailed description of the argument, as seen in 4, while the shorter ones, as seen in 5, tend to sketch out a more general version of the argument.

4. Malcolm Gladwell, author of the article “Most Likely to Succeed” from The New Yorker, presents a two-fold process to alleviate the problem, stating that better-trained teachers will cause better learning. He first suggests that it is impossible to predict the quality of a teacher before they begin teaching in the classroom, proving the current credential process to be ineffective. In addition, Gladwell thinks that . . .

5. Malcolm Gladwell proposes a training camp approach to hiring teachers where they are evaluated in a work setting over a period of time rather than solely by test scores or degrees.

The Review-Evaluation moves also varied in length as well as location within the text and purpose. The evaluative elements can be attitude markers such as evaluative adjectives and adverbs (e.g., convincing, relatively long-winded, successfully), or “distancing” verbs (e.g., attempts to illuminate), as seen in these examples.

6. New Yorker’s Malcolm Gladwell presents a convincing solution in his article “Most Likely to Succeed”: recruit and retain good educators through lower standards, an apprenticeship system and increased teacher salary.

7. Malcolm Gladwell’s “Most Likely to Succeed” attempts to illuminate what he calls “the quarterback problem” through his research of, and interviews with, those who are studying predictive competency in teachers. Through a relatively long-winded account of finance managers, teachers of variable moxie [sic], and football scouts, Gladwell proposes that “teachers should be judged after they have started their jobs, not before.”
The positive evaluative elements (as in 6) frequently, though not always, set the ground for an eventual acceptance of Gladwell’s argument in the Stand move. The negative evaluative elements (as in 7) often set the ground for an eventual rejection of the proposal.

**Taking a Stand**

The Stand move is the clearest statement in favor of or opposing Gladwell’s proposal, frequently realized as a statement of agreement or disagreement, an evaluative judgment, or a counterproposal, as in example 8.

8. *Gladwell looks to . . . He raises the question of how . . . [Review-Summary]. Gladwell makes a strong argument and is correct that society needs to train teachers more rigorously in order to ensure the creation of more successful teachers [Review-Evaluation]; however, his argument is flawed because it is missing an estimate or mention of the relative magnitude of the other factors that contribute to overall performance [Stand].*

We used AntConc to identify micro-level linguistic resources that the writers used to accomplish these moves. Importantly, in our use of the concordancing software we were not “just counting” as a machine might; we were continually looking at the intersections of patterns of word choices with rhetorical moves. We found that FYW writers use the following categories of language strategies more often than PREP writers:

1. References to and citations from the source text
2. Code glosses (e.g., *in other words; in fact*)
3. Evidentials of deduction (e.g., *therefore*)
4. Reporting verbs focused on processes of argumentation (e.g., *argues, claims, asserts*)
5. Contrastive connectors (e.g., *However, nevertheless*) and denials (*it is not . . .*)
6. Specific hedging devices associated with academic registers (e.g., *perhaps, likely*)

In contrast, fewer of the FYW writers use:
7. Self mentions (e.g., I and my), personalized stances (e.g., I agree . . .)

8. Boosters (e.g., clearly, certainly)

We now discuss categories 2 and 4–7 because the clearest differences between the PREP and FYW groups relate to these areas of language use. Differences in use of code glosses (e.g., in other words, for example), through which writers clarify or expound on information (Vande Kopple; Hyland “Disciplinary”), were pronounced, with FYW writers using these resources over twice as often as PREP writers: in relative frequencies (per 100,000 words), FYW writers used 107.2 code glosses (20.3% of total) to the PREP writers’ 73.2 (9.4%). Code glosses were realized through such phrases as: in fact, specifically, such as, that is to say, this means (that).

Table 2 shows that reporting verbs (e.g., explains, proposes, argues) were often used to review Gladwell’s argument. In these reporting verbs, writers in the FYW group more often used verbs associated with academic argumentation (e.g., argues, discusses, claims, asserts), while PREP writers more often used those associated with a spoken register (e.g., says, believes/thinks).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Searched items</th>
<th>FYW</th>
<th>PREP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gladwell . . . argues, discusses, claims, asserts</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladwell . . . says</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladwell . . . believes/thinks</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stand moves showed two patterns: 1) the use of self-mentions (e.g., I believe that Gladwell’s proposal is needed); or 2) objectively-worded assertions without self-mentions (e.g., Gladwell offers an appealing but unrealistic proposal). Table 3 shows that PREP writers were more likely to use self-mentions (e.g., I, my) with personalized stances (e.g., I agree).
Table 3: Frequencies of self-mentions and personalized stands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Searched items</th>
<th>FYW</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I agree, I disagree / do not agree / I believe, I strongly . . . support / (dis)agree / I think</strong></td>
<td>126.6</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I, we, me, my, our</strong></td>
<td>1024.1</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that FYW writers were more likely to use contrastive connectors (e.g., *however*), particularly at sentence beginnings and at the beginning of Stand moves, as well as explicit denial moves (e.g., *it is not*). In general, disclaiming strategies, or use of contrastive connectors and negations to bring alternative views into play before disclaiming them, appeared both in Stand moves as well as Review moves.

Table 4: Frequencies of disclaim moves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Searched items</th>
<th>FYW</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contrastive connectors</strong></td>
<td>745.9</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>however, but, while, etc.</em></td>
<td>634.5</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence-initial Contrastives</strong></td>
<td>224.6</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>However, But, While</em></td>
<td>129.3</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negations</strong></td>
<td>317.5</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>is not, does not, should not</em></td>
<td>236.6</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, more of the FYW writers used adverbs of probability (e.g., perhaps, possibly) and epistemic verbs (e.g., indicates and suggests) to create “hedging” moves (Hyland, “Stance”), or strategic weakening of commitment toward claims, while more of the PREP writers used modal verbs (e.g., may, might, could) and subjectivity expressions (e.g., in my opinion) when hedging (Table 5). This difference may reflect greater comfort with hedging devices that are more specific to academic registers on the part of a greater number of FYW writers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Frequencies of hedging devices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Searched items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perhaps, indicate(s), suggest(s), possibly, possible, likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may, might, could, probably, seem(s), I think/believe/feel, in my (view/opinion/perspective/experience)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These various linguistic differences suggest that more students who enrolled in FYW use language in academically valued ways, such as making frequent references to the source text under discussion (i.e., not assuming a shared interpretative context with the reader), using disclaim moves to engage with others’ views and voices (i.e., constructing a reader who is not already aligned with the author’s view), reformulating and exemplifying assertions (as shown in the use of code glosses), expressing assertions through “objective” wordings (avoiding self-mentions), and adopting a measured stance in academic-congruent forms (e.g., use of perhaps instead of in my view).

In the appendix, we present our analysis of a typical FYW introduction and a typical PREP introduction. While both paragraphs follow the prototypical move structure, the FYW text realizes these moves through different uses of
language. These include a greater number of references to the source text, specifically ones that are realized through argument-focused verbs (e.g., *Gladwell begins by explaining*), as well as code closes, contrastive connectors, and hedges. The PREP introduction also reviews Gladwell’s argument and takes a Stand, but the writer’s choices of references (e.g., *Gladwell said*; *Gladwell’s opinion*) are less focused on processes of argumentation. In addition, this paragraph does not project a measured argumentative stance marked by critical distance (as the FYW intro does), which is indexed by its absence of contrastive connectors, hedges, and code glosses.

With these examples, we certainly do not mean to suggest that we have identified the ingredients of “good” college writing. Nor do we propose that students who do not use these particular linguistic resources in their writing are not going to write effective arguments (or that students who do use them, are). What our methods have helped us to do, however, is to tease out several linguistic features that, in this context, help to differentiate between students who are more and less at ease with projecting a novice academic stance.

**Conclusion**

Our analytic approach—rhetorical move analysis combined with corpus-based text analysis—illuminated clear patterns in students’ attempts to realize the evidence-based argument called for in the DSP prompt. The patterns suggest that FYW students use more prototypical rhetorical moves to establish their opening stance vis-à-vis the source text than do PREP students. More PREP writers use words and phrases from a spoken and/or non-academic register and, as evidenced in the specific Stand moves, tend to be less critical of Gladwell’s ideas from the source text. In contrast, more FYW texts follow a formal academic register; are critical of the ideas in the source text; and signal processes of argumentation explicitly. Importantly, *both* groups use moves that allow them to review the source text and take a stand toward its main propositions. But the FYW realizations of those moves tended to include features privileged in undergraduate academic argumentation (countering, disclaiming, criticizing, and using a formal register). This assessment, then, addresses the criteria of site-based, locally controlled, contextually sensitive, rhetorically based, accessible, and theoretically consistent while at the same time offering student agency. It also provides empirical evidence of the validity of the modified DSP placement process by showing discernible differences in the writing of FYW and PREP students and, thereby, indicating that the assessment led to a good decision.
Besides informing validity, this assessment can also provide insights to improve writing assignments or prompts. The stance-taking evident in students’ writing shows how students negotiate (or don’t) the academic/rhetorical expectations—through both rhetorical moves and lexical/grammatical choices—in responding to the interpersonal and intertextual aspects inherent in the criteria of “focus” and “organization” in the DSP prompt and the aspect of reader engagement suggested by the criterion of “evidence.”

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This combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis of rhetorical moves and lexicogrammatical analysis also lends meaning to “college writing” in the context of the University of Michigan. Students who use prototypical moves can be described as performing college writing in this context, especially when they use an academic register to do so. Naming the specific rhetorical and linguistic strategies they use (e.g., in choices like sentence-initial counters or including prototypical moves) adds precision to the “rhetorical knowledge” held out as a goal in the Frameworks for Success in Postsecondary Writing.

In addition to proving the validity of placement and the nature of college writing, this assessment can improve writing instruction and writing programs. Not only do students have difficulty understanding what assignments ask of them, they also have a hard time, as Beaufort showed, understanding the underlying meanings behind generic forms and their instructors’ comments on their writing. Even though instructors may use similar terms—argument, evidence, audience, purpose, style and so on—these words carry “a variety of meanings and significance” (Thaiss and Zawacki 89). Assessment that foregrounds rhetorical and linguistic strategies can enhance instructors’ ability to make expectations clear. In addition, students can learn to use this assessment on their own writing. Some of our best teaching moments have focused on analyzing the rhetorical moves of student writing in class, and many of our students have found it revelatory to analyze their own writing using AntConc. The overall effect of instruction based on this assessment is to raise students’ level of awareness of rhetorical and linguistic strategies—some of which they may already be using effectively, as was the case for many students in both of our groups—that they are not consciously aware of.
From the perspective of student needs, this assessment can help students become more aware of how rhetorical moves and language choices expand their understanding of genre. Rounsaville et al. found that students call upon the limited number of the genres they know when approaching college writing, and this hampers their ability to transfer writing knowledge to new contexts. Accordingly, the current emphasis on new genre studies has led to increased attention to genre-focused pedagogies that emphasize the need to raise students’ awareness of genre as a conceptual tool for guiding their interpretation of rhetorical situations and for shaping their approaches to reading and writing. The main goal, in other words, is to equip students with a rhetorically reflexive awareness of genre that will enable them to read rhetorical scenes, take stock of their own genre knowledge, and recontextualize that knowledge to meet (or perhaps transform) the expectations of new and unfamiliar writing situations. With such awareness, students can come to view genres as “guideposts” (Bazerman, “Life” 19) or “keys” (Miller, “Genre” 165) that direct and open possibilities for their writing. But we believe students are more able to use genres as meaningful guideposts when they have an understanding of not only the general patterns and uses of the genre but also the particular linguistic and rhetorical choices that tend to enable the actions the genres perform.

Finally, this approach to assessment responds to White’s law: “Assess thyself or assessment will be done unto thee.” It suggests a set of principles and procedures that offer an alternative to externally imposed assessments, including those created by what has been described as the “alphabet soup of national standardized testing marketplace” (Adler-Kassner and O’Neill, 3). The tests that issue from this marketplace come with their own labels of reliability and validity as well as claims about students’ ability to produce “college writing.” However, the concept of validity underlying them lacks attention to the decisions and actions that issue from test scores; they also lack a detailed description of the features of rhetoric and language that characterize “college writing,” and they provide no information to improve writing programs. The alternative of following White’s law and developing assessment along the lines described here opens the possibility of putting assessment in the hands of those with expertise in composition and rhetoric. With local development of assessment comes flexibility to respond to the inevitable shifts and changes of a given context. As O’Neill notes, “An assessment program is not, after all, a concrete structure but rather a conceptual framework that needs to take into account the status quo—current theory, practice, resources, and personnel—while accommodating new knowledge, shifting contexts, and future needs” ("How
Does Writing” 453). Attention to local context—which embraces all of these features, shifts, and changes—requires modifications in procedures even when principles remain unchanged. It also offers a way to calculate, with a good deal of precision, students’ incomes, or the discursive resources that they bring as they matriculate into colleges and universities. The research of Rounsaville et al. shows the importance of enabling first-year students to recognize what they already know about genre, and the combination of rhetorical move analysis and corpus linguistics makes students’ discursive resources visible, both to their instructors and to themselves.

Equipped with the insights that this kind of assessment brings, students like Maria will be much more able to determine what constitutes “college writing” in a given context and the extent to which her own writing fits within that description.

Appendix A

Prototypical Introduction from FYW group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moves</th>
<th>Student Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>In the article “Most Likely to Succeed,” Malcolm Gladwell delves into the many ways in which the “quarterback problem” is affecting the American education system. Gladwell begins by explaining the etymology of the quoted term and continues by discussing its migration into other areas, more specifically the fashion in which teachers are selected. The financial-advice field is another professional area that is being greatly affected by the quarterback problem; however, according to Gladwell, financial advisers have discovered a technique to rid the field of this problem. Gladwell argues that this technique of, in a sense, throwing the high academic and cognitive standards out the window should be used to reform the process in which teachers are selected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>While this approach may seem enticing upon reading this article, it also seems redundant. The “apprenticeship” initiative is in many ways already a part of the selection process, with the requirement of teachers-to-be to completing a graded student teaching experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a</td>
<td>Indeed, while Malcolm Gladwell proposes reforming the selection and retention process for teachers by lowering standards for selection and paying successful teachers a bonus, the standards for selecting teachers should instead be reevaluated and raised, retaining the successful teachers the same way already proposed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Metadiscoursal Items Highlighted

- Evidentials/attributors: In the article “...”; Malcolm Gladwell delves; Gladwell begins by explaining; Gladwell ... continues by discussing; according to Gladwell; Gladwell argues; Malcolm Gladwell proposes

- Code glosses: more specifically, in a sense; indeed

- Contrastive connectors: however, while, instead

- Hedges: may seem; seems; in many ways

- Boosters: many, greatly

- Attitude markers: enticing, redundant

Prototypical Introduction from PREP group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moves</th>
<th>Student Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Teachers have a very demanding job. They are not only trusted to watch over many children but they are also expected to make sure that each child is learning at the standards set by society. Since teachers are such a potent factor in the development of what our society will become, it is important to pick them wisely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>After reading “Most Likely to Succeed,” by Malcolm Gladwell, I learned that it takes more than being educated to become a great teacher. Gladwell said that the thing that separates great teachers from normal teachers is their amount of “withitness”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a Stand</td>
<td>I concur with Gladwell’s opinion about picking and retaining teachers and I feel that a teachers’ “withitness” can be evaluated by a combination of strong will for the success of the students and sensitivity to the habits of the students to pick which after recognized and respected will naturally obtain and retain great teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Metadiscoursal Items Highlighted

- Evidentials/attributors: “Most Likely to Succeed,” by Malcolm Gladwell; Gladwell said; Gladwell’s opinion

- Boosters: very, not only ... but

- Personalized stances: I concur; I feel

- Attitude markers: demanding, potent, important
Acknowledgments
The authors are deeply grateful to colleagues Anne Curzan, Mary Schleppegrell, Megan Sweeney and John Swales for their ongoing support, their intellectual leadership, and their willingness to discuss and respond to multiple drafts of this article. “Local Assessment” would not have come into being without the insightful comments and suggestions offered by the anonymous reviewers and Kathi Yancey’s deft editorial guidance. To all, many thanks.

Notes
1. Our investigation of validity was based on Messick’s more comprehensive definition, one that frames validity in terms of content, substance, structure, generalizability, external features, and consequences.

2. iMOAT is an online evaluation and assessment tool that allows students to be holistically evaluated on a reading-to-write task by readers employed by iMOAT. Universities currently using the system are MIT, University of Cincinnati, DePaul University, California Technical Institute, and Louisiana State University. For more information, visit “iMOAT: The ICampus/MIT Online Assessment Tool,” http://web.mit.edu/imoat/.

3. The modified version of the DSP included providing to advisers more information about the writing prompt, the demographic and test score data that coincided with various levels of performance on the prompt, and the goals of PREP and FYW. Thus, although the twenty-minute meetings between advisers and students were not lengthened, the advisers were better prepared to help students understand their choices. The ongoing development and modification of DSP has included regularly soliciting feedback from advisers.

4. Surveys were administered to all students in FYW and PREP courses in 2009 and succeeding years to elicit information about why they chose their first writing course and the extent to which they thought it was the right choice. The instructor survey also asked if students were appropriately placed.

5. The three main areas of contemporary nonliterary genre studies, as originally identified by Sunny Hyon and taken up by others (e.g., Bawarshi and Reiff; Devitt; Martin and Rose) are North American rhetorical (or new rhetorical) genre studies and applied linguistics subfields English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Shared across the three traditions is a focus on genres as oral and written text types defined by their formal properties as well as by their communicative purposes, or action, within social contexts. Rhetorical genre studies especially distinguishes itself via a focus on the values and beliefs of the communities of genre users, its pedagogical focus on first language (L1) writing, and its research methodological focus on ethnographic approaches rather than
sentence-level text analysis (though we emphasize both in our study). ESP genre-based research focuses on both social function and form (Swales, “Aspects”; “Genre”; Bhatia, “Analysing”; Flowerdew), often foregrounding the formal characteristics of texts for purposes of instruction in academic and professional discourses, e.g., use of socio-rhetorical “moves” (e.g., Swales, “Aspects”; “Genre”; Thompson) or lexico-grammatical features such as hedges (e.g., Hyland, “Disciplinary”; “Stance”). Finally, the SFL-based approach to genre extends from Michael Halliday’s theory of language as a social semiotic system, viewing genre as staged, goal-oriented social processes (Martin). The SFL pedagogical approach (frequently dubbed “the Sydney School,” as in Hyon) aims to assist students to “deconstruct” and later independently construct the recurring stages and lexico-grammatical patterns of school genres, with a broad aim of reversing inequities in students’ access to discursive capital. For more detail on these three traditions, especially vis-à-vis classroom approaches, see Hyon and Johns.

6. AntConc was developed by Laurence Anthony of Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. The software and instructions are free for download from the author’s homepage at http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/.

7. There is variation in the ways that students perform genres, and rhetorical move analysis affords a heuristic procedure to characterize such variation in a way that keeps in mind students’ creativity but also accounts for what professors and other stakeholders may expect as prototypical features of a genre. Our use of “prototypical” here is inspired by Swales’s discussion of the applicability of prototype theory to genre analysis (“Genre”; “Research”). According to this theory, certain types within a category, like birds, are perceived as more prototypical than other types. For birds, robins are perceived as more bird-like than ostriches or penguins because robins display more of the attributes that people associate with the general category bird, like the ability to fly and chirp. Similarly, some instances of a genre may have more of the features commonly associated with the genre in a social context. Such texts would be regarded as more “prototypical” instantiations of the genre than others with fewer such features.

8. The greater use of sentence-initial contrastives in the FYW introductions suggests that more of these writers are signaling to the reader the onset of a “countering” move (Thompson and Zhou).

9. This dimension of our analysis addresses the criterion dimension of validity. In writing assessment a narrow definition of criterion might be based on a timed and holistically scored essay, while a more generous definition is based, as Yancey and Weiser show, on portfolios created across a semester of student writing.

10. Messick describes this process of extending assessment to program evaluation as consequential validity.
11. Originally posted on the Writing Program Administrators listserv, December 7, 1996, the entire quote reads: “I give you White’s law the truth of which I have noted for over twenty years: Assess thyself or assessment will be done unto thee.”

Works Cited


——. “Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre.” *Genre and the New*


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