

Entering the Conversation: Graduate Thesis Proposals as Genre

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Writing a thesis proposal can be a nerve-racking enterprise, even for students who have successfully completed graduate course work. One of my students referred to the proposal process as "dreaded"; others mentioned feelings of "extreme tension," "occasional panic," and "sleepless nights." Unfortunately, such anxiety is not entirely unwarranted. Each year, as a member of a committee that evaluates thesis proposals, I read several that will be rejected or at least need significant revision.

Why do graduate students, in the humanities as well as in other disciplines, tend to experience problems when they write thesis proposals? This essay explores some of the factors that have made the task unnecessarily anxiety-provoking and offers facilitative possibilities based on rhetorical genre theory and a process approach to writing.

MISCONCEPTIONS AND ELITISM

That a number of graduate students experience difficulty when they write thesis or dissertation proposals can be traced to several misconceptions about graduate student writing that originated in the past and continue to influence departmental expectations. In particular, it is often assumed that graduate students in English, by definition, write well enough to develop a thesis or dissertation without further instruction in writing; that a thesis or dissertation is similar to other papers students have written; and that graduate course work in English adequately prepares students for writing a thesis or dissertation—that is, that students who have successfully written seminar papers will proceed with relatively little difficulty through the thesis or dissertation process, from proposal to draft to polished document.

As a result of these misconceptions, most graduate students receive little or no writing instruction as they embark on the process of writing their proposals, the assumption being that they are proficient writers who do not need additional instruction. In fact, a statement written in 1900 for the Pedagogical Section of the Modern Language Association contains the following statement about graduate student writing that is still

pertinent today: "When a man has obtained his A.B. degree he ought to be able to write his language with sufficient correctness to be responsible in the future for his own style. If he has not thus learned to write reasonably well, he probably never will learn" (Mead xxii).

We may easily dismiss the gender bias and non-process-oriented approach to writing in this statement, but in the context of writing graduate thesis proposals its underlying assumption remains surprisingly current. Patricia Sullivan notes:

[M]ost graduate faculty assume that graduate students, by definition, "already know how to write," and thus writing assumes a secondary and often marginal role in graduate education. The written product, but not the writing process, compels the attention of graduate faculty... Despite development of theories which emphasize the processes and contexts of interpretation, we are still tied to current-traditional modes of writing instruction. (285)

Sullivan's observation characterizes an assumption about graduate student writing that remains too well established to be easily dethroned. Certainly, when I agree to direct an MA thesis, my expectation is that students who have written compelling or at least satisfactory papers in my graduate seminars have developed a workable writing process that will enable them to develop a thesis proposal successfully. Often, however, they come to my office in confusion, some in despair. Many of them have no idea what a proposal looks like, have only a general notion of a topic they might like to explore, and are unaware of what is involved in transforming a topic into a workable thesis proposal. Thesis anxiety causes some to avoid writing as long as possible; they engage in extensive reading and note-taking as an avoidance strategy or procrastinate in other ways. Some, as Marilyn Urion notes, despite initial confidence, develop writing blocks (5).

One factor to consider is that the thesis proposal, like the freshman essay and like academic writing in general, derives from a historically based exclusivity associated with the humanities or what Gerald Graff refers to as "the Matthew Arnold view of literature and culture" (3). To some extent, the task of constructing an effective proposal fulfills a

gate-keeping function, whose unstated agenda is to determine who is qualified to enter the profession. In this context, observations on the inherent elitism of the freshman essay by Shirley Brice Heath and by Sharon Crowley pertain as well to the graduate thesis proposal. Tracing the origins of what she refers to as "the school essay," Heath points to elitist impulses in the academy, noting that originally "English Composition emerged as a gate-keeping mechanism for immigrants and the increasing portion of working-class students attempting to make their way into secondary and higher education at the end of the nineteenth century" (116). Similarly, Crowley, in her examination of the origins of the first-year writing course, notes that its underlying objective is "to supply teachers with opportunities to measure student performance. In other words, the fact of the requirement provides first year composition with an institutional motivation rather than a rhetorical one" (8).

Heath's and Crowley's observations of this underlying elitism can be likened to the situation encountered by graduate students who attempt to write a thesis proposal without fully understanding the nature of the genre, without being presented with a model, without reading any form of guidebook, or in some cases without ever having read a proposal. Many graduate students, in English as in other disciplines, are unaware **that a successful thesis proposal must situate the intended work in both a rhetorical and disciplinary context. A thesis serves two interconnected and equally important functions: it must address a crux or problem in the discipline that is recognized as significant by the academic establishment (represented by a graduate studies committee or thesis director), and it must demonstrate that the student is worthy of entering the disciplinary conversation.** Writing the proposal, then, can be viewed as a high-stakes initiation rite or, as Urion phrases it, as "a place wherein initiates are brought to a state of abjection" (5). The process requires the student to demonstrate familiarity with critical disciplinary issues; to problematize and focus a topic; and to fulfill genre expectations, not only in form and style but also in terms of rhetorical goals, authorial persona, and constructed audience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENRE

In referring to the necessity of fulfilling genre expectations, I use the word **genre** not to denote a formal text category but rather as it has been redefined over the past thirty years in the composition literature in terms of **function** (see Bawarshij Devitt, "Generalizing"; Freedman, "Show" and "What"; Miller)-that is, as **typified social action**

that responds to a recurring situation. This reconceptualized and more encompassing definition of *genre* is based on the idea "that people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and that these ways of acting become typified through occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances" (Devitt, "Integrating" 698). This perspective views a **text as a typical rhetorical interaction that is situated in a social context.**

Significant work in genre has been conducted in Australia, but, as John Flowerdew notes, "it has been focused more on the primary and (to a lesser extent) secondary school genres rather than those of the university" (3) and has had very little application to graduate student writing. Thus, although the thesis proposal in graduate English programs is a recognized and recognizable genre, it is a **genre that has not been adequately defined or explicated for would-be initiates.** Anyone who has directed or evaluated a graduate thesis knows that many students begin the process of writing a proposal without a clear idea of its generic expectations—that is, what it is intended to do, what it is supposed to look like, and what the established members of the discourse community are expecting it to be. To figure all of this out with a minimum of assistance appears to be the goal.

Moreover, although professors who serve as advisers may have little difficulty identifying (or complaining about) inadequacies in a graduate proposal, they often do not define its rhetorical goals and genre requirements to their students, sometimes because they have not consciously articulated these goals and requirements for themselves or perhaps because they feel that they shouldn't have to. As Crowley observes, "The humanist impulse is to impart instruction to a select few who are considered able to inhabit a humanist subjectivity" (12), and those select few presumably are people who can discern on their own what is regarded as acceptable. These are the students who are deemed intellectually worthy on the basis of their presumed literary sensibilities, which have been cultivated and nurtured by intense exposure to distinguished works of literature or literary criticism.

Essentially, the process through which students are taught (or not taught) to write a graduate thesis proposal completely ignores recent research in composition, with its emphasis on process, multiple drafts, rhetorical goals, and discourse community. Ironically, the approach adheres to a remarkably old-fashioned, current-traditional paradigm. To write in that paradigm means that students are expected to know intuitively what is required of them, because if they don't know, they shouldn't have been admitted

to the program. Is it any wonder that, when faced with this dilemma, graduate students ask few questions and embark on the process without a clear sense of purpose? Like others in similar situations, they sometimes don't know what questions to ask.

Of course, it also must be acknowledged that any **new writing task intended for an unfamiliar discourse community requires some form of pretense: the necessity of pretending to be an expert when you are really a novice and to write as if you have been long acquainted with information and perspectives that you learned only recently**. In a history of rhetoric course, for example, students may use the terms *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* as confidently as if they have been using them all their lives, when they have learned them only last week. **The ability to distinguish old from new knowledge is another mark of membership in a community, thus even if students have only recently learned a phrase or concept, they must give the impression of great familiarity with it**. In the context of the thesis proposal, professors may tacitly encourage this form of pretense by the avoidance of detailed explanation or definition.

But even if directors of graduate theses were to attempt to define the proposal genre explicitly for their students, it is likely that students would continue to experience at least some difficulty. A genre is complex, not simply a collection of textual features or a set of organizational slots into which content is inserted (Martin; Christie), and no clear-cut formula can enable a graduate student to learn a new genre quickly. In fact, a significant controversy in genre scholarship concerns the issue of whether the direct teaching of genre is at all useful in helping students acquire and apply genre knowledge. Aviva Freedman argues:

[T]he accomplishment of school genres is achieved without either the writers or those eliciting the writing being able to articulate the sophisticated rules that underlie them. These rules are complex, nuanced, variable, context-specific, and as yet unamenable to complete reconstruction even by skilled researchers.

("What" 130-31)

Nevertheless, in the context of the thesis proposal, I would argue that although explicit teaching cannot provide an instant solution, **a genre approach helps: that is, presenting the proposal in terms of rhetorical purpose, form, and textual features and enabling students to examine exemplary and nonexemplary models**-what we do in first-year writing courses. As the title of Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb's

essay on the value of explicit teaching indicates, "what you don't know won't help you." John Swales, similarly advocating explicit depiction of genre, notes that genres have tendencies toward certain features and that a text's acceptability is measured in terms of how far outside it strays from those tendencies. James Martin, Frances Christie, and Joan Rothery argue a similar position, pointing out that writers "cannot take up options they do not have" (77).

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROPOSAL WRITING

I offer, then, the following suggestions, based on rhetorical genre theory and a process approach to writing, that can enable graduate students to write thesis and dissertation proposals more effectively.

Utilize a Rhetorical Genre Approach to the Thesis Proposal

The recent reconceptualization of genre theory provides an effective approach to help graduate students understand the purpose, structure, and rhetorical goals of the thesis proposal. Carolyn Miller points out that "an **understanding of genre** can help account for the way we encounter, interpret, react to, and create particular texts" (151). As Kathleen Jamieson has argued, an understanding of genre is not limited to an analysis of the characteristics of a particular text; it includes an **awareness of how an appropriate response to a recurring situation is influenced by antecedent genres**. Building on Jamieson's work, Anis Bawarshi explains that genres help **shape and maintain the ways we act in particular situations**, helping us as both readers and writers to function in them while also shaping how we come to know them. **Genre influences not only the text itself but also the roles played by both writers and readers as they are constructed by that text in a social context**. These insights would be helpful for graduate students to have when they embark on the process of writing their proposals.

One simple but important application of rhetorical genre theory to the thesis proposal involves **acknowledging that a proposal is considerably different from the type of assignments students have so far encountered in seminars or courses**. Students preparing to write a thesis or dissertation have written a number of papers, but for the most part the assignments were small in scope, well-defined, and due at a particular time. Before, students worked intensively on a circumscribed task for a delimited period;

writing a thesis or dissertation is usually the first time that they are faced **with a large, unstructured project**, and "usually nothing in their prior training has prepared them for managing such a project" (Davis and Parker 1).

Keep a Thesis Log

To help students navigate the process of constructing this new genre, I suggest that they keep what I refer to as a **thesis log (for an example, see app.1)**. The thesis log can help raise student consciousness about the goals of a thesis or dissertation and can facilitate communication between [147] student and adviser; moreover, the necessity of writing in the log two or three times a week generates consistent focus on the task.

Identify Text Partners

Rhetorical genre theory is oriented toward the concept of audience, another aspect of the process that students sometimes find confusing. Whereas the audience for a seminar paper is usually defined in terms of a specific professor, writing a thesis proposal involves **addressing a wider and to some extent unfamiliar audience**. A. G. Sertillanges notes, "We never think entirely alone: we think in company, in a vast collaboration; we work with the workers of the past and of the present" (145). But for many graduate students beginning on a thesis or dissertation these potential collaborators are strangers.

A genre approach to the proposal can enable students to locate and become acquainted with these **potential collaborators in the literature**, so a useful strategy is to have students identify what I refer to **as text partners-that is, the texts to which the proposal is responding.**' The concept of text partners (see the worksheet in app. 2) enables students to identify specific written works that they hope to directly engage with their writing. These partners are not the actual authors of pertinent texts; they are the texts themselves. **I suggest that students identify three or four text partners (articles and books) as a means of focusing research questions and entering the scholarly discussion.** They can then imagine these personified texts involved in a conversation and imagine themselves participating in that conversation, **listening politely, connecting with points already made, and identifying three or more points that would interest the chosen partners.** Although this strategy will not

guarantee a focused proposal, it encourages students to take an active role in discovering a workable research question.

View the Proposal as a Plan for Action

A genre approach to the thesis proposal can enable students to view it as a plan for action (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman 43). **Once a problem or question worth addressing is isolated**, the proposal presents the strategies and activities whereby a solution or answer may be discovered. In my role as thesis adviser, I often ask my students to complete the following three questions:

1. Before my audience reads my thesis, they are likely to think or believe

about my topic.

2. After my audience reads my thesis, I would like them to think or believe

about my topic.

3. In order to move my audience to consider my ideas worthwhile, I plan to

use the following approaches:

Problematize

The most important application of rhetorical genre theory to the writing of thesis proposals is that it privileges functionality: posing an intellectual problem can lead to the framing of a research question and a means of answering it. Several years ago, Susan MacDonald noted the pervasiveness of **problem definition in multiple academic venues**, arguing that "the subject of academic writing either already is or is soon turned into a problem before the writer proceeds. No matter how tentative the solutions are, it is problem-solving that generates all academic writing" (316). Awareness of **the necessity to problematize** can help students understand that a thesis requires them to pose a question worth exploring and that the proposal then has the purpose of showing how that question can be answered.

Consult Examples

Associated with a genre approach is the use of **examples or models**, a strategy that is regarded with **considerable suspicion by a number of compositionists because of its association with authoritarian, top-down pedagogy and an emphasis on form.**

But such objections to the use of modeling focus on genre merely as form or structure, without acknowledging the significance of rhetorical moves, a term associated with the work of Swales. As Flowerdew notes, for any genre there are "preferential expectations about the way information should be organized" (3), which suggests that examination of the rhetorical moves in a text model can direct attention to both function and form.

Certainly, if I were to enter a new discourse community—for instance, suppose I decided to enroll in law school—I know I would find it useful to examine a sample of a brief before I attempted to write one. No doubt, my initial brief would reflect my novice status; and it would take a significant amount of time before I would be able to imitate successfully the language of a lawyer. Still, I would do a better job of writing a brief if I were given an opportunity to examine one beforehand and discuss it with a supportive adviser.

STRATEGIES ASSOCIATED WITH PROCESS PEDAGOGY

In the more than hundred years since the 1900 report to the MLA was written, rhetoric and composition has developed into an established discipline, yielding important pedagogical insights into the teaching of undergraduate writing that can be applied to the teaching of writing to graduate students beginning a thesis or dissertation. In the following section, I suggest several approaches and strategies associated with process oriented teaching that advisers can adapt.

An environment in which students develop successful thesis proposals can be established by a thoughtful adviser, yet many students are often unaware of the adviser's role in the proposal process and of the importance of choosing the right person; nor do advisers always clarify their role and their expectations for students. As Gordon Davis and Clyde Parker note, "There should be a mutual understanding of advisor-student roles" (11) and an implied contract between the student and adviser that the adviser will

- provide guidance

- .respond in a reasonable time to the papers given to read
- be reasonably consistent in advice
- protect the student from unreasonable demands
- assist the student at those times when the voice of a faculty member advocate is necessary
- generally aid the student in pursuing the dissertation project

Most advisers are supportive, but, as Patrick Dunleavy observes, "Some supervisors may be indifferent writers, or not very interested in or proficient in developing other people's authoring capabilities" (4).

Beyond being supportive, an adviser can raise student consciousness about what is involved in planning a large text project, in particular the setting of realistic goals and the developing of good research strategies. Demonstrating efficient reading and note-taking strategies can also be helpful. **Advisers can urge students to share developing ideas with peers**, in essence encouraging peer review, which has become a staple of freshman writing and creative writing classes but which is rarely used by graduate students, whether because of time pressure or anxiety. Those of us who work with graduate students writing thesis proposals might therefore find it worthwhile to schedule **peer workshops in which drafts of proposals can be shared**. Such workshops would demystify the process, enable graduate students to discuss the proposal as a genre, and facilitate mutually beneficial feedback in a relatively risk-free environment.

Finally, a **process-oriented adviser can help students understand that a proposal, particularly in its earliest iterations, constitutes a mechanism for discovery** and reassure them that "being puzzled, being unsure, being mistaken, and changing tack through trial and error, seem to be both integral and conducive to creative research" (Minkin iv). Students entering a new discipline are often paralyzed by what they perceive as the need for them to develop something original, unaware that **originality in the academic world evolves from the voices of others**. A genre and process-oriented approach to the thesis or dissertation proposal can enable students to enter the scholarly conversation more successfully and remove some of the dread associated with the task.

NOTE

1. Discussing a similar idea, Huff uses the term "conversants" (45).

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