Reading Like a Writer: Find the Power in Academic Text

50-word abstract: L2 academic writers are often adept content readers, or passive consumers of knowledge. Yet they may have little experience as writers, or active producers, of text, hence unable to read strategically. “Reading like a Writer” combines genre awareness, text analysis, and outlining to empower writers to read more mindfully.

Lesson Plan

“Reading Like a Writer” is a three-step foundational activity that combines genre awareness with text analysis and authentic materials to enable L2 research writers to become more independent learners.

1) First, instructors guide L2 writers on a Genre Walk through a hard-paper copy of a prestigious, inter-disciplinary, global journal, Science. In this walk, students work in pairs with copies of the journal to compare and contrast different kinds of texts they see from news to technical reports. The Table of Contents gives them a hint of the variety, but perusing the journal allows them to see the genre differences more clearly. This analysis is followed by a group listing of all the different kinds of genres observed in the journal, then discussion and analysis of Science’s author’s guidelines, which describe the audience and purpose for each manuscript type. The guidelines are found at http://www.sciencemag.org/site/feature/contribinfo/prep/gen_info.xhtml#categories.

Possible questions during the Genre Walk include:

- How would you describe the front? Who is the audience? Who are the writers? Article types? Purpose? Structure?
- How would you describe the back? Who is the audience? Who are the writers? Article types? Purpose? Structure?
- Where is the easiest place to get published? The hardest place? Why?
• Where and what would you want to write/publish?

Note: We subscribe to Science, so we have enough back-copies for students to each have a copy of the journal. If you do not have multiple copies, this part of the activity could be done at your college’s library or online with students viewing the current issue. Or, select a journal that is popular in your country or suitable to the kinds of students you are working with. The only two criteria are that it demonstrates good writing and multiple genres, including your target genres.

2) Second, students are asked to think about how athletes learn to make really good plays. They analyze them, often with the benefit of television freeze-rewind-replay that allows deconstruction of strategy, technique, and execution. Soccer is used as a metaphor. Then, the instructors invite students to analyze some writing published in a prestigious journal using the same process. Instructors present an inductive, yet habitual, way to analyze any academic text type for six essential criteria (audience, purpose, organization, style, flow, and presentation; Swales and Feak, 2004, p. 7). Prior to this session, student writers are assigned a short, high-interest text for homework reading. They are instructed: Read the article for homework and come prepared to discuss it in a writing context. In class, student writers work in pairs to practice “Reading Like a Writer”, using a short (1-page) high-interest text and a micro-scaffolding tool with embedded discourse analysis prompts. Working together, it takes them 10-15 minutes to work through the questions about Higher-Order-Concerns and Later-Order-Concerns. In the analysis, students begin to notice new and different features of the text. They also critically evaluate the text at the end and rate it on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest quality. They compare and defend their ratings and decide: Is the article a good model for a writer to use? Why or why not?

Note: One of our target texts is an empirical research article with an Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion (IMRD) structure. To teach this text, we use the journal Science’s Brevia feature, which is a one-page, 600-700 words IMRD article. We carefully select Brevia articles for high general interest as some are highly technical and specialized. Two that we use are “A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind” http://www.sciencemag.org/content/330/6006/932.full and “Are Women Really more Talkative than Men?” http://www.sciencemag.org/content/317/5834/82.full. You will likewise want to select target texts that are a learning priority for your students. The only criteria is that they be short (readable in about 15 minutes), high-quality writing, and high interest.

3) Third, student writers engage in an in-class group outlining activity (using the Outlining organizer) of the article they just read to see how to model the target genre and apply new knowledge to an individual writing project. Finally, for homework, they find a model article in their own field and use it as a guide to outline an article of their own that they will write. Specifically, they are encouraged to model structural strategies, transitional devices, formulaic
language, and clarity in style. They bring outlines to class for peer review and revision, then use the outline and model article(s) as guides for writing their own text.

**Note:** In our courses, we stick to short writing assignments, so the journal *Science*’s Brevia is a good length for a writing project. We also write short, 600-word Introductions or Problem-Solution Texts, 300-word Abstracts and 300-word Data Commentaries based on analysis of these target texts in groups reading like writers.

Benefits of Reading Like a Writer include:

- Ability to analyze & evaluate articles for writer’s concerns, finding better models
- Ability to outline and model the structure and strategies of good published articles
- Shorter learning curves with new genres, hence, better first drafts
- Higher, self-imposed writing standards
- Better critiquing and self-editing skills.

In summary, Reading Like a Writer is an independent learning strategy for teaching yourself how to write in a new genre. It can be adapted and applied to any publication and any genre at any level.

**References**


