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Helping Students Recognize and Use Rhetorical Features in their Discipline

It's not uncommon to encounter student writing that feels like the student has done a good job of marshaling sources, but has not yet figured out how to talk about them. In other words, there is no frame narrative, no sense of the author's stance or position. This kind of draft feels like what one of my students called "all bricks, no mortar." This failure to act as the narrator (conductor, curator—choose your metaphor) probably has multiple etiologies. Students often feel deep insecurity about moving into the role of authority, which is precisely what the thesis or dissertation process demands that they do. But it's also the case that students may not recognize how authorship, authority, and stance are created at the rhetorical level in their fields. These can be particularly subtle in fields where the use of the first person is interdicted (especially where passive voice is encouraged). Likewise, it can be difficult for EAL (English as additional language) students.

Ask students to choose an article from their own research area and "code" for the presence of authorship (sometimes called "voice markers").

Some common observations:

Byline (Obvious, right? But what about articles with long lists of authors? What / does author order signify? In fields where multi-authorship is common, have students trace the controversy over how authors names are ordered and how these lists are received / read. (Some studies suggest that even when author names are alphabetized, the first author named gets primary credit.)

Use of first person, singular or plural. Have students discuss the ontological reasoning behind the preference for or against the use of first person in their fields. Ask students to observe: if first person is used, where does it show up?

Use of third person to refer to self. “The researcher finds that...” Ask students to think about why reference to the self in third person is considered more acceptable than use of the first person (John, 2012).

Use of advanced organizers / signposts. Meta-narrative that describes what a project does announces authorial presence regardless of whether it uses first person or not. Ask students to observe where advanced organizers and signposts are commonly used.

Use of evaluative adjectives. “Nugyen’s important work on...” How do authors signal their position through the use of adjectives? (Xie, 2016)

Use of hedging terms. It may seem paradoxical to students, but the use of hedging terms actually strengthens academic arguments precisely because absolute claims are nearly always subject to exceptions. More experienced academic writers tend to use more hedging terms (Dresden-Hammouda, 2014).

Choice of verbs. John (2012) suggests that the choice of attributive verbs can also signal author position. He argues, for example, that the words “find” and “suggest” are relatively neutral (do not identify a writer’s position) (p. 191-192), while “claim” may signal disagreement or distance (p. 193) and “point out” can signal agreement (p. 194).

Choice and treatment of sources. Authors may signal disciplinary belonging or stance by referencing particular authors or groups of authors. Students frequently observe that the same authors are cited over and over in a given sub-field, which suggests that citing foundational works is a way of signaling authority in a field. Likewise, referencing schools of thought within a field (“behaviorists see student learning as...” or “constructivists see student learning as...”) can also signal mastery.

Repeat this exercise for things like synthesis, evaluation, argumentation, etc.

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