

Taking the High Road: Why Learning to Write Isn't Easy and What We Can Do About It

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Meghann Meeusen recounts her struggle to master a genre she thought she understood, only to realize the complexity that comes from subtle differences in purpose, function and context from one kind of writing to another. She discovers that to become a successful writer in a challenging genre, she cannot expect to easily transfer knowledge or practice until it makes perfect, but must instead rely on a purposeful analysis of genre features and contextual factors that make every type of writing unique. Meghann describes how grappling with such concepts as high and low road transfer, genre immersion, and analysis of rhetorical context helps her to meet writing challenges that may seem insurmountable.

Writing isn't easy. Which is strange, right? I mean, we do it every day. Think about the last time you went a whole day without writing. No email. No text messaging. No shopping list scribbled on the back of a receipt. No notes for class. Can you do it? Can you think of a day when you didn't write a single word? In fact, I can't think of many things I do as regularly as writing. Brushing my teeth, I suppose. Driving my car. Making myself a cup of tea. Yet the fact of the matter is that I practice those activities so often that they have become easy. I had to learn how to boil the water for tea, and how long to let the tea bag seep in the cup so it isn't too strong or too weak. It took a while to get the hang of waiting long enough not to burn my mouth, but not so long that the tea gets cold and yucky. But now that I know how, I can make tea when I'm half asleep, and I still end up with a pretty successful cup. So if we write with the same kind of regularity as other basic activities we do every day, why isn't writing easy too?

Does Practice Make Perfect?

It took a long time for me to figure out the answer to that question. This is in part because for much of my life, writing did seem pretty easy. I can spit out an email like nobody's business. My text messages are witty and succinct. And I'm pretty good at school writing too...well, one kind of school writing, at least. After years of practice, I'm pretty savvy at writing a literary analysis paper for class. I'm sorry to say that I don't have a secret to how to do this, however. In part, I can thank my mother (who is an elementary school teacher) for reading through my papers and insisting I revise over and over and over again. I suppose that's really the key—it was repetition that cemented this genre in my mind. Class after class of writing how Hester Prynne feels about wearing that red letter A and why Lady Macbeth couldn't get that damn spot out, out, out—after writing enough of these papers, I simply caught on.

Yet, it certainly wasn't easy. What makes that kind of class paper really tricky is that teachers often don't provide a lot of instruction about it. A teacher asks students to think critically and look deeply into the literature, read a story closely and pick out details that seem meaningful. Vague, but I just gave it a try. Maybe the paper didn't always turn out so great, but the professor would appreciate that I had proofread my essay enough that it was at least pretty coherent, and he'd tell me half a dozen things that he didn't like. *"Don't use the 'to be' verb so much. Make sure your thesis is at the end of your introduction. You really shouldn't use clichés or spout broad generalizations about society that you can't prove."* Check, check, check. In the next essay, I'd follow these pretty straight forward instructions, and usually it worked. The professor would plop an "A" on my paper, and I'd pat myself on the back, grateful that I could add writing to my skill repertoire right alongside driving and making a mean cup of tea. Then I'd get to the next class, and the list would change—this professor cares a lot about using sources to back up assertions and wants me to master MLA rules. Check, check...move on. And pretty soon, by simply making an effort to follow all the collected rules that professors told me were the "most important," I could write what I was told was a pretty strong essay.

So when I graduated from college with my fancy (and relatively impractical) English major, I was pretty convinced that I was a good writer. I felt confident that I knew how to pick out an interesting detail about a novel and expound on it, pulling out the select quotes I could understand from six or eight critical articles to add credibility and back up the ideas I presented. In fact, I would even say that I believed I had mastered the literary analysis genre, and thought that this meant I was set for life. With my fabulous writing portfolio in hand, complete with essays discussing portrayals of women and the "quest for identity" in *Ella Enchanted*, *Harry Potter* and *Island of the Blue*

Dolphins, I was fairly sure that I was only one step away from publishing my ideas in academic journals. I knew I would need to develop these skills more—I mean, that’s what graduate school is for anyway, right? But I had the basics, and I was ready to go.

And I did improve. I went to graduate school and instead of writing 8-10 page papers, I was writing 20 pages. “*It should be more like the journal articles you are reading,*” I was told. Ok, deep breath, I can handle this. I’ll simply use the same skills I’ve used before—transfer what professors told me about “good writing” in class papers to this new situation. I found out later I was trying to employ what researchers call “low road transfer,”¹ which they define as “automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context.” Sounds complicated, but the example helped: if you can drive a car, it will be pretty easy to learn how to drive a truck. This is exactly what I was doing...writing essays that looked a lot like the ones I had always been writing, only longer with more sources and more examples. And once again, I was rewarded with a big fat A on many of my papers...success!

So when my teachers started talking about how I should be thinking about submitting some of the work I was doing for class to academic journals, I thought the same would be true. An academic article is only an essay after all, albeit one written by someone who claims expertise on a topic and can back that up by using research effectively. This is a lot like the writing I was already doing: about the same number of pages, uses sources to back up what I have to say about literature, has a thesis statement that says something that hasn’t been said before. There were some differences of course; I noticed that articles all use a fancy title where the first part is clever and the second part informative, like “Disdain or Ignorance? Literary Theory and the Absence of Children’s Literature” or “Reading the Shards and Fragments: Holocaust Literature for Young Readers.” I can do that. Academic essays use footnotes to talk about sources too, which incidentally beefs up the works cited page. No problem there. Low road transfer, here I come...like a car and a truck, the essays I wrote for school used skills similar enough to an academic article that I thought I should be able to automatically transfer these skills to the new situation. In no time, I’ll be a published academic. Easy, right?

All Genres are Not Created Equal

No. Not easy. Somewhere between adding footnotes and writing more pages, I realized that my writing wasn’t at all like an academic article. To make matters worse, the stakes were higher. I wasn’t writing for class anymore;

I was writing to get published. Getting published means getting a job... it means that someone would pay me to study literature. Here is my dream, and suddenly, it depends on my ability to write this one specific kind of essay. Plus, as if that isn't enough pressure, there are hundreds of other students who I have to compete with...and guess what? Unlike in class, where in theory if we do what the teacher says, we'd all get As, in this new world, only the people who can produce a text in this genre the *best* are going to live their dream. Insert your choice of dismayed explicative here.

Ok, well, high stakes. Ok. Ok. That's what I say to myself when I'm stressed. I just keep repeating the word ok, over and over again...hoping that if I say it enough, things might actually *be* ok. I've always been a good writer, always have been able to take one kind of writing and make it work in a new situation. Why should this be any different?

But it is different. Every kind of writing is different. All along, I had believed that the kind of writing I was doing for class was the same kind of writing that academics do when they publish their research in journals. In fact, I thought the kind of writing I was doing for class was the same as writing I'd do in any situation. And in the case of an academic journal article, it is very close to the same. However, like my grandfather sometimes says, close only counts in horseshoes and hand-grenades. What I came to realize was that I'd mastered a genre—the literary analysis class paper. The problem is that one genre, no matter how similar, isn't the same as another genre. To make matters worse, it is those seemingly small and subtle differences that will sneak up and bite you in the...well, you know what I mean.

I sometimes think of this as genre deception. One genre hiding in sheep's clothing, pretending it is just like another genre when really, it is not. I suppose this is being a little critical. I doubt that the class essay is really trying to pass itself off as the academic article; instead, it is more like *practice* for the “real thing.” However, the problem is that when I practice, practice makes perfect and suddenly, I found myself so good at the practice, I couldn't do the real thing.

All this time, I had been relying on low road transfer, while what I really needed was high road transfer. High road transfer “depends on deliberate, mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application to another” and requires “reflective thought in abstracting from one context and seeking connections with other.”²² This may seem confusing, but like the car and truck example, it is simpler than it sounds. High road transfer is a lot like low road transfer, except that you have to analyze the new activity instead of just assuming that one kind of driving is like another. So maybe it is more like knowing how to drive a car and being told that now you have to drive a

huge piece of farm equipment. There are some similarities, so the idea is that to figure out how to drive the tractor, you analyze what you did to drive the car and see how it might apply (or not apply) in the new situation. But you also have to study the new situation and think about what makes it a unique activity. In other words, it isn't enough to rely on my practice makes perfect mentality. You can practice driving a car until you are blue in the face, but that practice alone might not be enough to transfer this knowledge to the new situation, no matter how similar it is. Because no matter how many times you drive a car, it doesn't mean that when you find yourself in a tractor, you'll know how to plow a field.

Now granted, if you just keep trying to learn something new, you'll probably eventually get it...trial and error is a wonderful learning tool, after all. And that applies to writing as well. If you just keep trying a certain kind of writing, immerse yourself in it and practice it over and over again, chances are that eventually you'll get pretty good at it, just like I did with the literary analysis class paper. This is what researchers call *genre immersion*.³ However, although immersion in a genre is helpful, it often isn't enough. Think of immersion in a new culture; if you move to France and become a part of the society, eventually you will start picking up French mannerisms and language naturally. This, however, takes years, and even then, sometimes doesn't work.

So what do you do if you can't immerse yourself in French culture for years and years? Well, you can speed up this process by analyzing and studying French culture and what makes it unique. You can think about the times you traveled to other places, deciding which of the shifts will be helpful in this new context. Purposeful reflection on the new situation, why it is the way it is, and how you can apply or alter what you already know can help you be successful without having to rely on trial and error—and that's high road transfer.

Practice + Purpose Makes More Perfect

In the same way, although immersion in a genre of writing can really work, sometimes you need something more. By purposefully analyzing the features of the new genre and trying to figure out what makes it unique, I was able to more effectively adapt what I knew to a new situation. But to do this, I had to consider one more part of the equation...context.

To adapt my skills to meet new expectations, I had to understand why those expectations were important; essentially, I needed to know the purpose or reason behind the writing choices I was trying to mimic. For example, in the writing I did for class, I used critical sources in primarily two ways. First,

I used what scholars wrote about the texts and ideas I was studying to back up my own assertions. “*Give your assertions some credibility by quoting others who agree,*” professors had told me, and a carefully inserted quote works great to accomplish this. Secondly, after reading a book about academic writing called *They Say, I Say*,⁴ I realized that the basis of my essay should be to enter into discourse, which basically means (like the title of the book indicates), that I should consider what critics say about a topic and situate my own discussion in response.

These two uses of sources in class papers represent features of the genre of the class paper, and certainly, these features transfer to an academic article. However, what I failed to realize was that the context or purpose behind these writing choices changes in an article for publication. Instead of proving to a professor that I had done some research, I needed to prove to an entire academic community that not only am I an expert in the various topics I’m writing about, but that my argument emerges from specific understanding of what has already been established about these topics. This may seem like a small change, but it completely revolutionizes the construction of an article. My writing had to change, and to understand how, I needed first to understand *why* the new genre is constructed the way it is.

To do this, I had to reflect on the genre itself and analyze not only what makes it unique, but why those characteristics exist. Even though the genre of the class paper and the academic article are similar, their context, purpose and audience are very different. Adapting to these differences means thinking about why writers make the choices they make, and I’ve found that the fastest way to do this is through genre analysis. For me, this means looking at examples of a particular kind of writing and tracing the moves that the writer makes, then talking to writers of these kinds of texts about how and why they make these moves. If I can understand what ideologies developing over time have influenced the reasons for making these moves, I can start to see not only what I need to do in my writing, but why. Doing so helps me see that my writing isn’t just one isolated text meeting one particular expectation by one audience, but a small piece in a complex genre puzzle. This knowledge has helped me to battle the genre deception that caused me so much strife.

I wish I could say I have won this battle, that I have mastered the “scholarly journal article” genre and conquered it once and for all. I wish I could tell you that one day it finally clicked and all the pieces fell into place. In some ways, this has happened. Yet, I can’t ignore the need for genre immersion—not just for a semester or two, but over and over and over again—years of repetition and reinforcement. You can’t possibly master any genre after only a few tries, and for some genres, it takes a lifetime of work. It isn’t easy. Writing isn’t

easy. But in my life, being able to analyze a genre and its context has helped accelerate the process of figuring out and mastering new kinds of writing that seemed insurmountable challenges. Seeing the pieces of the puzzle, but also its context—the picture on the puzzle box, how many pieces there are, why they are shaped the way they are shaped—has helped me to start assembling the puzzle in a more meaningful way. This knowledge has been far more valuable than mastering savvy semicolon usage or expert quotation style. Instead, I’ve learned a lesson that I’ll take with me whenever I encounter a new kind of writing. I know that analyzing a genre in all its complexity can help me transfer what I already know into what I need to know. Low road transfer may work great in many situations, but I’ve learned that taking the high road can help me navigate the treacherous paths of writing with far greater ease.

Endnotes

1. Among others, D.N. Perkins and Gabriel Salomen discuss the ideas of high and low road transfer in their 1988 essay “Teaching for Transfer,” a concept further explored by Angela Rounsaville, Rachel Goldberg, and Anis Bawarshi in their essay, “From Incomes to Outcomes: FYW Students’ Prior Genre Knowledge, Meta-Cognition and the Question of Transfer.”
2. See #1.
3. For a comprehensive overview of genre theory and ideas of immersion, consider Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff’s *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin’s study in *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication* and Mary Soliday’s “Mapping Classroom Genres in a Science in Society Course.”
4. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s 2006 *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter In Academic Writing*. Although this text offers a clear articulation of some of the most complicated ways that writers enter academic discourse, the way it stresses a template model can be very problematic. Simply following their templates can cause some of the problems I struggled with, for writing in a new genre is more complicated than simply following a set of rules.

Sources

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