

What is a discourse community?

And why does it matter?

This slide show/pdf is from Dr. Carrie Hall, and in it she explains a lot about discourse communities.

The simplest way to think of them is as the groups you belong to: professional, community, cultural. They give us identity, they let us become part of a fairly closed group that has its own rules and language, and they matter to us.

For Unit One, you'll be writing about how language works in one of your discourse communities. But first, look at this slide show, leave comments and questions. Then go read the excerpt from Junot Diaz, which is all about a culture.





DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

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We think of 1101 as a course in which the student learns who they are as a writer-- a course somewhat about the writer as the self.

We think of 1121 more of a course about the writer in the world-- looking outward. Writing for the public, if you will.

But what is "the public?" There is no one clear public-- there are many groups! This is where we get into the concept of "Discourse Communities."

Discourse Communities are groups of people who "share the same goals, the same methods of communicating, the same genres, and the same lexis (specialized language)" (Melzer). Whenever we write, we are writing as a member of a particular discourse community and we are trying to reach members of particular communities. We are trying to reach a particular subset of "the public." No publication or genre will ever reach an audience of "everyone."

NOT EVERY GROUP IS A DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

The group must share a "discourse." So, to some extent, it's about size-- and shared language. But it goes a bit further than just words. It's also about how we look, talk, and what we believe and value. The group has to be small enough to have a shared jargon, and it needs also to be small enough that some people are **included** and others are **excluded**.

Consider skateboarders, for example. They have a shared slang, way of dress (even stickers on their belongings) and to some extent belief system).

Groups like "Americans" or even "American youth" or "women" are simply too big to share common discourse.



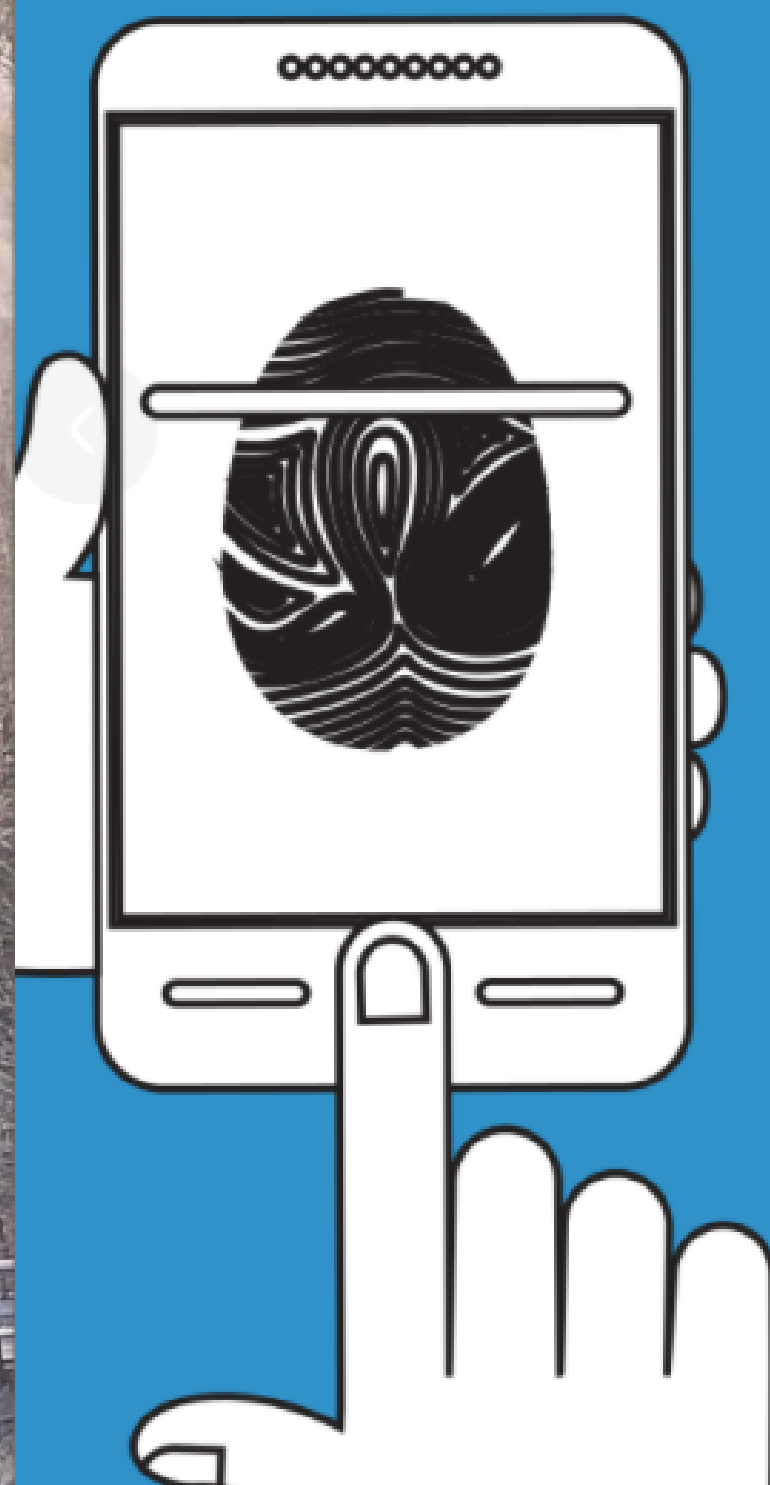
JAMES PAUL GEE ON DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

According to James Paul Gee, a Discourse is a "sort of 'identity kit,' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instruction on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (Gee 7).

In later articles, Gee took up the concept (popularized by John Swales) of the "Discourse Community." Gee described inclusion in discourse communities as a combination of five factors:

- saying
- doing
- being
- valuing
- believing

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A FEW MORE EXAMPLES OF DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES:



- Nuyoricans
- Black Lives Matter activists
- Online gamers
- Particular academic discourses
- Members of particular religious congregations or churches
- Alt-right sub-groups (but not "The Right" in general, because there is too wide a range of thinking-valuing-believing-saying-doing)

**ALL ACTS OF WRITING ARE ACTS OF PARTICIPATION IN
(OR ATTEMPTS TO PARTICIPATE IN) PARTICULAR
DISCOURSES AND DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES.**

We are always trying to learn the language of the "in crowd," whether it's the slang of a neighborhood or the jargon of a medical field we are trying to get a job in.

We also sometimes address discourse communities we are not a part of in our writing -- as an outsider-- to try to sway them to our side. But when we do this, we must still understand how this DC communicates.



Importance of Discourse Community

- Discourse Communities help you:
 - Write in situations where communities have specific language and goals of writing
 - Determine what is the best method to approach rhetorical situations
 - Guide your writing
- Knowing the discourse community you are addressing when you are writing is helpful in organizing and effectively getting your point across to your audience.
- Discourse community helps list and analyze constraints of rhetorical situation.



**OKAY, REMEMBER-- A DISCOURSE COMMUNITY IS A GROUP THAT SHARES WAYS OF:
SAYING, DOING, BEING, VALUING AND BELIEVING**

**THIS MIGHT MEAN PEOPLE HAVE SIMILAR WAYS OF DRESSING, TALKING, THINKING AND
EVEN SIMILAR GESTURES. THEY MAY SHARE SIMILAR VALUES.**

**PEOPLE IN PARTICULAR DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES USUALLY (BUT NOT ALWAYS) RECOGNIZE
EACH OTHER WHEN THEY MEET.**

**IN EACH DISCOURSE COMMUNITY, THERE ARE INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS.
WITH THIS IN MIND, WHAT DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES ARE YOU A PART OF?**

