

“CONVOLUTED WORDS OF FRENCH ORIGIN”: STUDENT CONCEPTIONS OF  
ACADEMIC WRITING

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**Title**

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CONCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING

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North Dakota State University’s regulations and meets the accepted  
standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

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## ABSTRACT

Student beliefs about academic writing convince them that academic writing should sound boring or familiar in a way that precludes innovation. Composition teachers are clearly telegraphing *something* to students about writing, it's just not the message that we want to send. In a qualitative study of five student interviews about academic writing, this paper argues that the message students receive tells them that academic writing should be stilted, awkward. It should sound as "smart" as possible. It should sound like other "academic texts" they have read. Some of the goals of composition, however, are to teach that writing is something versatile, worthwhile, and something that we can pursue in recognizable forms. Students conceive of "academic writing" as its own genre whose recognizable form relies just as heavily on awkward wording, boring topics, and prescriptive but subjective instructor feedback as it does on features such as citations and credible research.

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## **DEDICATION**

To my cohort family: Vanessa, Ben, McKenna, Lore, Zach, Syeda, Luke, Andrea.

To my mom, my dad, and my brother: my main support in everything I do.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am a graduate student at North Dakota State University who has worked as an instructor of our first year writing class (English 120) for two years. Initially, I was interested in the rhetorical moves that students make to write papers that “sound” academic. Before students even begin to write, however, they must have conceptions of what “academic writing” *actually is*. Instead of investigating students’ academic writing starting with their written products, I decided to go directly to the source and ask students themselves about how they understand academic writing. In my classes, my students’ work often sounds similar to each other--similar enough to pique my curiosity. Their wording often sounds awkward, not at all like the vibrant individuals with whom I interact three times a week. Dawn Skorczewski has written about the use of cliché in student writing, saying “How can it be that students write for pages about the complexities of power, multiple identities, and situated knowledges and then refute what they have discussed in a trite or overused phrase?” (221). David Bartholomae, too, discusses how students often fall back on language familiar to them such as clichés, saying, “They slip, then, into the more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson or the voice of a parent lecturing at the dinner table” (6). It seems there is something inherent in student beliefs about academic writing that convinces them that academic writing should, for lack of a more tactful phrase, sound boring or at least sound familiar in a way that precludes innovation. John Warner, in his book *Why Can't They Write?*, says, “much of the writing students are asked to do in school is not writing so much as an imitation of writing, creating an artifact resembling writing which is not, in fact, the product of a robust, flexible writing process” (5). We’re clearly telegraphing *something* to students about writing, it’s just not the message that composition professors want to send. The message students receive tells them that academic writing should be

stilted, awkward, and sound as “smart” as possible, and sound similar to other “academic texts” they have read. Some of the goals of composition, however, are to teach that writing is something versatile, worthwhile, and something that we can pursue in recognizable forms. After asking students what they believe academic writing to be, some themes became clear. Students conceive of “academic writing” as its own genre whose recognizable form relies just as heavily on awkward wording, boring topics, and prescriptive but subjective instructor feedback as it does on features such as citations and credible research.

### Research Question

I had a hunch that there might be consistencies in how FYW students understand academic writing. The questions that sprang to mind were these: How do students understand “academic writing” as a concept? How do their conceptions of “academic writing” affect their writing processes? To students, what are the main features of academic writing? David Bartholomae has already noted through rhetorical analysis that student writers tend to emulate some kind of “Academic Voice” but nowhere in the scholarship does anyone actually *ask the students* about what that voice is. Patrick Sullivan’s *A New Writing Classroom* advocates for updating the genres expected from a writing classroom and for moving beyond the simple argumentative essay that typifies most academic writing, arguing that academic writing as it currently is taught lacks the nuance of genres that might more effectively engage students in critical thought. Sullivan advocates, too, for integrating practices of listening into the writing classroom. Dawn Skorczewski writes about the ways students use cliches to communicate complex ideas, even if the language they use does not accurately reflect that complexity, and she asks students about the cliches they use, but not about academic writing more generally. Kristine Johnson, in her study of representations of students in composition scholarship, says, “For nearly

seventy years, composition teachers and scholars have built a modern discipline and have created a body of theoretical, empirical, and practical knowledge about writing. And on average, they have represented students in each paragraph of their published work” (428). Students are indispensable in the work of composition studies--to the point that scholars mention students an *average* of once a paragraph. Because students are so ubiquitous in the study of writing and composition, it is important to represent their perspectives on our work, but there is a clear gap in the research. Nowhere does anyone say hey, maybe we should ask students what they think academic writing is and sounds like, what those features that they’re trying to get at are. So here I am. My aim here is to take Bartholomae’s, Sullivan’s, Skorczewski’s, and Johnson’s insights and illuminate them from a new direction. What does acquiring the tools to participate in academic discussions look like to students? What even *is* academic writing to students? Initially, I wanted to pursue this question using literary monster theory--most notably Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” to describe the ways in which student writing makes itself sound strange to try and placate academic expectations. It quickly became clear that in order to do that analysis, however, I needed to actually ask some students about their experiences with academic writing. I needed to know what students even see academic writing as.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to undertake a study about how students view academic writing, I needed to understand the scholarly discussions around several aspects of first year writing. First, this study represents student voices, so much of this literature review reflects research on how to ethically include those voices--Joseph Harris and Kristine Johnson in particular are indispensable voices on this. Next, the study is engaged with many prominent themes in composition theory such as teaching first year writing, student perspectives on the writing process, the actual definition of writing studies, and the concept of academic writing itself. Oft-cited scholars such as David Bartholomae, Nancy Sommers, and Lisa Delpit inform much of my work here in their varied discussions of students, writing classrooms, and the field of composition studies. Other more recent scholarship such as *Developing Writers In Higher Education* edited by Anne Ruggles Gere informs the way I analyze students' interview answers. I have endeavored to call upon scholarship that has widely influenced the field and scholarship that is directly engaged with understanding how students view academic writing and why they view it that way.

### Situating Student Perspectives

Most of the theoretical framework for this research builds from David Bartholomae's influential article "Inventing the University." Bartholomae describes the "academic voice" that students try to emulate when they write and analyzes those student voices from the perspective of professors trying to best support new college writers. Bartholomae writes, "He [the student] has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (4). Students must learn the correct tone, the correct jargon, the correct forms in order to participate successfully in academic discourse. Often, that learning process sounds or

looks strange. Students understand the things that define the academic discourse community as features, drawbacks, and frustrations inherent in academic writing. Bartholomae says,

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. (4-5)

Academic writing requires students to pretend--and that pretending is part of what allows them to finally gain access to academic discourse. Bartholomae describes students learning to write academically as almost new language-learners. In thinking about how students conceive of academic writing, it is important to take Bartholomae into account. Students are new to the genre and are therefore navigating it as newcomers to a discourse.

Bartholomae is not the only scholar who writes about the student struggle with academic writing and authority. In her 1992 essay on revision, Nancy Sommers says,

As soon as they begin to turn their attention toward outside sources, they too lose confidence, defer to the voice of the academy, and write in the voice of Everystudent to an audience they think of as Everyteacher. They disguise themselves in the weighty, imponderable voice of acquired authority: 'In today's society,' for instance, or 'Since the beginning of civilization mankind has ... .' Or, as one student wrote about authority itself, 'In attempting to investigate the

origins of authority of the group, we must first decide exactly what we mean by authority.’ (29)

In the essay, Sommers describes the search for authority in ourselves and for rhetorical power to claim as our own. Part of the difficulty of academic writing comes from the fact that students have to write as though they are an authority on a topic. Students are, however, by definition not the authority either in their classrooms or their fields. Sommers argues that when students cannot access this authoritative identity, they mask their own voice with the voice of “Everystudent,” a voice that Bartholomae recognizes in cliches and a kind of teaching rhetoric. Bartholomae says, “To speak to us as a person of status or privilege, the writer can either speak to us in our terms--in the privileged language of university discourse--or, in default (or in defiance), he can speak to us as though we were children, offering us the wisdom of experience” (8). Students may default, according to both Sommers and Bartholomae, to a generic voice that seems to have authority, but not the kind of authority an academic audience expects. Instead, these scholars argue that students default to a tone reminiscent of teaching children.

Nancy Sommers does not dwell on “Everystudent,” but she does revisit the difficulty of freshman composition in a later essay with Laura Saltz. In their 2004 article on a longitudinal study of Harvard student composition, Sommers and Saltz say, “Freshmen are required to become master builders while they are still apprentices--to build as they become familiar with the materials and methods of construction. They are asked to develop expertise in new subjects and methodologies, while still learning how to handle the tools of these disciplines and decipher their user’s manuals” (132). Their essay describes student work in detail and investigates the ways in which freshman year impacts later writing development. Again, the ways that students understand and move through their less skilled writing is not in and of itself the focus of the

essay, but rather something that Sommers and Saltz acknowledge and then move beyond to discuss other details of the impact of freshman year. They write, “Even if asking freshmen to do the work of experts invites imitative rather than independent behavior, it is the means, paradoxically, through which they learn to use writing tools of their own and grow passionate about their work” (Sommer and Saltz 135). Students learn to do their own academic writing by imitating other academic writing. The problem is that this pretending lends to the idea that academic writing is about regurgitating what an instructor wants to hear, that students have no choice in what they write about, and that academic writing is dry and boring. Sommers and Saltz argue that students find their own passion for their work through the pretending stage, and I agree, but before they get to the passion, students still must write academically even if they don’t understand what purpose it serves.

When assigning academic writing, instructors and scholars may expect students to adhere to specific conventions, but students may not even know those conventions exist. Patricia Bizzell, in her article “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing,” says that the problems of basic writers are

better understood in terms of their unfamiliarity with the academic discourse community, combined, perhaps, with such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered. (230)

The academic discourse community has specific expectations and conventions that students do not have access to until they take a course in writing--and sometimes even then, those conventions still seem hidden or inaccessible. Dan Melzer’s *Assignments Across the Curriculum* provides an overview of the types of writing required of university students recently. Melzer,

too, sees assignments as especially indicative of the values of the academic discourse community--again, something of which students may not even be aware. In completing assignments, students are engaging directly with the implicit values of academic discourse whether instructors make that clear or not. This leads students to view academic writing as a task that requires hitting a set of secret requirements, set by each instructor on an individual basis. Lisa Delpit's 1988 article "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" illuminates the responsibility of educators to give all students access to the rules of power, both explicit and implicit. Delpit is indispensable when considering how students view academic writing and all it entails. Academic tone, syntax, and diction--each is a method of reinforcing existing institutional power, so student perspectives on the conventions of academic discourse are also informed by their background and life experience. Scholars after Delpit have worked to expand the field's understanding of and work for marginalized students. In particular, the 2020 "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!" from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (written in part as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement) moves beyond Delpit's framing of the rules of power as necessary to students and move toward integrating students' own linguistic backgrounds in the classroom. The "DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice" lists five demands central to amplifying marginalized voices in the composition classroom. Similarly, at the June 2021 CCCC, the NCTE released a statement on Ebonics advocating for more research and training on Black language. Students speak from their particular marginalized positions, and it is important to keep scholarship on Black language in mind when working with student voices, especially from my position at an overwhelmingly white university. When analyzing student answers to interview questions, it is important to note that those answers come from specific life



experiences. Students' perspectives are particular to each student, even while they reveal generalizable themes in student understanding of academic writing.

### Features of Academic Writing

Many scholars have discussed different features of both “academic” and “student” writing. Emily Wilson and Justine Post, in “Toward Critical Engagement: Affect and Action in Student Interactions with Instructor Feedback”, write,

For others, receiving differing feedback across instructors became an obstacle that caused them to view writing as subjective and arbitrary, making it more difficult for them to engage in the writing process. These dispositions not only informed how students engaged with instructor feedback, they influenced their attitudes toward writing and conceptions of audience. (54)

Wilson and Post describe the ways in which students respond to instructor feedback. Because instructor expectation comprised such a large part of student understanding of what academic writing is, other perspectives on student-instructor responses allow me to make more generalizable conclusions. Wilson and Post argue that instructor feedback influences not just how students perform on particular assignments, but how they conceive of academic writing as an activity. Instructor feedback and expectation becomes both part and parcel of most academic writing even when instructors ask students to write for wider audiences. In their chapter of *Developing Writers*, Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson say that “when asked to discuss their own development as writers, students commonly turned to talk about specific ‘kinds of writing’ that divided writing—as activity and as product—into the categories of ‘academic’ and ‘creative’” (90). Another feature of academic writing is its diametric opposition to “creative” writing, as though academic writing doesn’t involve creativity. In 2009, Kelly Ritter and Stephanie

Vanderslice guest-edited a special edition of *College English* that specifically called the divide between “academic” disciplines and “creative” writing to the forefront. Ritter and Vanderslice aim to trace the ways that creative writing as a discipline is preparing to change in the twenty-first century. The scholars cited in their special edition, “Creative Writing in the Twenty-First Century”, take up some of the same problems that students in Hutton and Gibson’s study noted—especially the distinction between academic rigor and creative work. Hutton and Gibson describe the difference between students who cling to this distinction and students who integrate creativity into their academic writing, removing arbitrary boundaries that limit how they view the purpose of each act of writing. They go on to describe student frustration about academic writing as a whole, saying,

these overarching domains of the “academic” and the “creative” appear to emerge from a base-level frustration with how academic writing, consciously or not, is most broadly presented in school contexts—as a inflexible construct determined exclusively by static formulas and an overly local sense of audience (the instructor). (Hutton and Gibson 110)

These students associate academic writing with a subjective instructor who sets their own distinct standards for what academic writing entails. Hutton and Gibson’s study participants feel frustration about the perceived inflexibility of academic writing, which comes from the perceived lack of creative freedom, which comes from the perceived inflexibility of instructors.

Other than its association with an instructor-audience, many student writers view academic writing as voiceless, styleless, and neutral. Academic writing’s “personality” is that it has no personality. Paul Kei Matsuda and Christine M. Tardy, in “Voice in Academic Writing: The Rhetorical Construction of Author Identity in Blind Manuscript Review”, write

Caught in the dichotomy between personal writing and academic writing, the notion of voice has often been relegated to the realm of personal and individual, whereas academic writing has been characterized as relatively impersonal—if not objective or neutral—and therefore voiceless. (236)

Matsuda and Tardy note that one of the features of academic writing is its history as a genre characterized by neutrality. Indeed, part of this investigation asks students to name just these kinds of features of academic writing in order to see whether students understand academic writing in the same way as scholars or instructors. The impersonal nature of (most) academic writing lends to the perception of academic writing as not just a genre where there should be more research than personal reflection, but a genre in which it is actively “bad” or “against the rules” to include any writerly personality. Some articles are even solution-oriented about the “academic voice” in student writing. In 2008, Rebecca Gemmell writes,

“What frustrated me about the essays I was getting, and why I procrastinated reading them, was that they all sounded the same, not at all like the lively, diverse group of students I enjoyed working with in my classroom...[One student] did what I call ‘robot writing’ in which he, like many students, parroted back everything I had said in class about *The Canterbury Tales* or *Macbeth*. (62)

Gemmell’s article centers the practice of keeping a writer’s notebook as a way for students to overcome the “robot writing.” She uses a few key phrases that characterize the specific type of writing I’m detailing: they all sounded the same; parroting; not at all lively (at one point she even notes that a student’s writing reads like “cardboard” (64)). Gemmell’s article, aside from not being very charitable about student work and assuming a little too much about student interiority, is fairly representative of the way academic mimicry is received by instructors. She characterizes

it as an obstacle to be overcome, a type of writing that students naturally move beyond. There is no desire to dwell in that space because the mimicry, in many ways, evokes a negative reaction. Overall, while many scholars focus on writer development, writing in the first year classroom, and student voice, none of them actually ask students what they believe academic writing to be.

### Student Work and Perspectives

For scholarship that integrates student perspectives, I looked to the *Journal of Basic Writing*. The *JBW* focuses on the debates and discussions surrounding how best to serve the student population mainly comprised of writers who are not quite prepared for freshman comp. Though my research is about freshman comp, the writers in *JBW* face similar frustrations as the students I interviewed. The scholars published in *JBW* focus much of their writing on the perspectives of student writers. In the last eight issues, about a quarter of the articles feature student perspectives on basic writing. In some cases, such as Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakoor's "Self/Portrait of a Basic Writer: Broadening the Scope of Research on College Remediation" or Sean Molloy, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam's "'Root and Branch': Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System", the students in question are coauthors of the article and provide their firsthand accounts of a basic writing class. In other cases, such as Maureen McBride and Meghan A. Sweeney's "Frustration and Hope: Examining Students' Emotional Responses to Reading", student perspectives come to the reader mediated by the scholars' interpretations. Either way, students have an undeniable presence in the field of writing studies and their opinions on how and why instructors teach basic writing help shape the conversations happening in the field. These articles inform my own treatment of student voices by providing methodological examples of interviews and coding and rhetorical analysis of student answers. Though at this pilot stage, students are not featured as coauthors, later stages of research might benefit from integrating

study participants more fully into the research process. Either way, student voices are indispensable in our understanding of writing studies, and this paper participates in that tradition.

Part of the research into student perspectives includes learning how to *ethically* represent student voices in scholarship. When students are not here to interpret their own words for themselves, a scholar must be sure to interpret their words in good faith--there is a power differential at work because the scholar (me, in this case) speaks for the students and often over the students. In this area, I draw most heavily upon Joseph Harris's 2012 article "Using Student Texts in Composition Scholarship." Harris says,

[W]e often seem to approach the work of students taught by our colleagues with the kind of circumspection we might use in talking about their children. That is, we are hesitant to criticize, at least in public. The effect is both to infantilize students and to moderate vigorous discussion of our work as teachers (687).

Harris's article, however, does not recommend using student work recklessly--on the contrary, Harris suggests ensuring that scholarly work gives due thought to a student as a complex subject as well as to the text as a complex work. While this study treats student interviews, not student texts, Harris's article still applies. I perform a rigorous analysis, but not an unkind one. Harris heartily recommends getting student permission before using their work, which I agree with and took to heart in being sure to obtain both IRB and student permission before describing and discussing their interviews. I also followed the NCTE's "CCCC Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies", the professional standard for the field. One of the specific guidelines says, "To avoid situations in which students feel that their decision to participate (or not) in a study might affect their instructor's treatment of them, we recruit

participants from other classes or other sources.” Participants for this particular research come from outside of my own course sections to avoid just this pressure. Joseph Harris also says,

We can try to understand, to respond to what students say in their writing, but we can never simply turn their language into our own. Instead, once quoted, student texts can be reinterpreted by other scholars in ways we cannot control. Their value lies in how, at least sometimes, they can disrupt the smooth flow of our discourse about writing and its teaching. (689)

Quoting students in scholarly work opens student words up to reinterpretation by other scholars. Any work relying upon students’ words whether through interviews or through analysis of their writing must fairly represent those words because a scholar cannot make student language simply be what the scholar wants it to be. Harris notes that student work often disrupts “the smooth flow of discourse.” Many of the answers my study participants gave do disrupt that flow by contradicting what scholars may expect to hear from students--and that is one of the values of using student voices. They are not ideologically aligned with any schools of thought in the same way that researchers of composition are, so their answers often weave between ideologies, making connections between two totally disparate schools of thought.

While Harris specifically focuses on ethically reading student work, Kristine Johnson focuses more broadly on representations of students as people in composition scholarship as a whole. Johnson says, “When implicit assumptions about students are made explicit, they become available for critique and can prompt reflection on the discursive and material relationship between representing teachers and represented students” (407) When writing about students, scholars should make their assumptions and opinions explicit so that the scholars themselves are open to critique and interpretation like the students they analyze. Johnson also notes that on the

whole, scholars doing the writing and representing are teachers who inherently have power over the population they write about: students. The most ubiquitous of the assumptions that Johnson argues should be explicit is this:

“[C]omposition scholars represent students as marked writers who produce marked writing, forwarding the idea that student writers are not real writers. Student writers produce student writing, a discursive pattern that constructs and reinforces a dichotomy between student writers and writing and normative writers and writing. (424)

Scholars treat student writing as different than writing in general, marking students as less than other writers. When Johnson says “marked writing,” that is both figurative and literal, referring both to the ways in which student writing is marked but instructors who correct student papers and to the ways in which scholarship positions student writing as other. Students produce writing just as any other type of writer and deserve to be treated with the same seriousness and regard.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The clearest way to amplify student perspectives on academic writing is to ask students to share their perspectives on academic writing. To this end, I set out to interview first year writing students over the spring semester of 2021. In order to ethically include student perspectives, I obtained IRB approval of an interview protocol. The protocol includes the set of questions included in the appendix of this document as well as an informed consent document detailing any risks to/benefits for students participating in the study. In order to select students to interview, I sent an email announcement to students in first year writing (excluding those students in my own classes to avoid students signing up because they were worried about how not doing so might affect their grade). Over the spring of 2021, I conducted five interviews with first year writing students from North Dakota State University.

The current study works as a pilot for larger studies on how students perceive academic writing. Because participation in the study relied upon self-selection by students, my data is limited to those students who felt confident enough to reach out via email and volunteer. In future, a more randomized selection of students might yield different results. For a pilot study, however, five students provide more than enough information to draw some general conclusions. Despite there being only five students involved, I still interviewed a diverse group for NDSU. The participants included two women and three men, one of whom is a student of color, and one international student. Below is a participant table that briefly describes the five participants (Table 1).



Table 1: Student Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	General Description	Demographic Information
Thomas	A first year student (just out of high school) studying engineering	Male, 18-19yo, Black, Engl. 120
Alex	A non-traditional international student with an advanced degree at his home university going to school to be able to practice medicine here.	Male, 28-30yo, white, Engl. 120
Ken	A second-year student studying computer science	Male, 19-21yo, white, Engl. 120
Scarlett	A first-year student studying radiological technologies	Female, 18-19yo, white, Engl. 120
Maggie	A first year writing student	Female, 18-19yo, white, Engl. 120

I conducted the interviews via zoom, which were recorded with the students' consent. The interview questions were meant to probe student understanding of "academic writing" without pre-providing any definitions. That way, students felt no pressure to conform their descriptions of academic writing to any specific definition. To begin each interview, I reiterated important information from the informed consent document and reminded students that the interviews were recorded. From there, I gave a brief description of what students should expect from the interview: I would ask a few questions about academic writing generally and then ask about their own work and experiences specifically. The last thing I asked before the formal interview was if the student had a pseudonym they preferred that I use when writing about their answers. After all of the interviews were complete, I transcribed each interview in order to both perform rhetorical analyses of student answers and to use coding to get a more quantitative and data-driven understanding of their responses.

I am using a two-pronged approach to qualitatively analyze the students' responses. Using Johnny Saldaña's *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* as a reference, I chose in-

vivo coding to preserve the specificity of the students' language. In-vivo coding pulls specific salient phrases from a dataset to enable an analysis based on the specific words and phrases that study participants use. For every interview answer, I pulled out those words and phrases that were particularly evocative, prescient, or highly characteristic of the participant's voice. After in-vivo coding, I moved into a round of descriptive coding and thematic analysis in order to pull out consistent patterns and themes in the answers. Descriptive coding is not the most specific form of coding--a researcher simply describes data with a group of words or phrases. In-vivo coding allows me to make specific points about individual data, while descriptive coding and thematic analysis allows me to identify larger ideas that are consistent across interviews. Researchers Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke describe thematic analysis as

a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. (57)

First, I pulled out important words and phrases from student answers, then categorized those words and phrases based on themes that appeared across the data. I counted the number of times each "theme" appeared in student answers. These themes allow me to make more general statements about student views on academic writing--or at least gesture toward areas that need more exploration.

I used an inductive coding method, which means that I derived my codes from the data itself. An inductive method requires code revision and updates as I progressed through the project. As such, I moved from in-vivo coding to descriptive coding to create larger consistent code categories. The descriptive codes underwent two rounds of revision because some of the

codes, it became clear, were not specific enough or needed to be updated to accurately reflect the data. First, I decided to differentiate between “instructor expectation” and “assessment” because “instructor expectation” specifically focuses on what students believe instructors *want* versus assessment, which focuses on how instructors *grade*. “Instructor expectation” often describes answers that focus on more intangible concepts than grades, such as what instructors want to see or how they individually react. Assessment, on the other hand, has clear ties to measurable responses and is therefore a different and more tangible form of academic expectation. Second, upon first pass, I coded answers that described different important elements of academic writing with the general code “academic features.” It quickly became clear that “academic features” was not descriptive or specific enough--students mentioned it at about a rate of 3 to 1 with the other categories. In the second round of coding, I broke “academic features” down into specific features like purpose, difficulty, style/voice, word choice, and audience. These subcategories much more clearly communicated the specific features that students associate with academic writing. Finally, I had to consider whether to use the tag “research” or the tag “credibility” to describe student answers that discuss the importance of sources in academic writing. “Research” could have been “credibility” but the students overwhelmingly mention citing sources and conducting research as the method by which their writing is credible. Overall, the process of refining codes included several instances of reviewing my own categories and justifying either their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in order to accurately and fairly represent the data.

The tables below list the codes that I used in the first and second round of descriptive coding (which were developed from the in-vivo codes that I initially developed from the student’s answers themselves). I coded for features of academic writing, but also for themes that seemed present in student answers that didn’t necessarily fit exactly with what I expected to see.

As such, codes like “affect” and “recommendation” represent an emotional dimension to students’ interactions with academic writing and a tendency for students to recommend new pedagogical courses of action in their responses respectively despite the fact that neither of these are themes that I was initially interested in exploring. An example of the full coding process looks like this:

1. Student Interview Answer: “I think that most of them come...I think the feedback. It’s usually feedback you receive that gives you understanding of what people want you to say. And when you see their feedback, usually you don’t make the same mistake on the next assignment.”
2. In-Vivo Coding (focused on preserving student voice and zeroing in on interesting phrases): “the feedback” “what people want you to say” “don't make the same mistake”
3. Descriptive Coding Round 1 (focused on pulling out larger themes inherent in the data):  
The general categories to the right in Table 2 describe the general theme under which the specific in-vivo code falls.

Table 2: First Round of Descriptive Coding

In-Vivo Code	General Category
“what people want you to say”	instructor expectation
“don’t make the same mistakes”	assessment

4. Descriptive Coding Round 2 (focused on re-examining the in-vivo codes for any nuance missed in the first round; useful for identifying secondary themes in codes that already fell into one general category; refining codes that are too broad, like “academic features”): The bolded addition of “assessment” in Table 3 means that the in-vivo code already describes instructor expectation, but could also be relevant to the theme of

assessment, something I did not identify in the first round of coding, but have added here.

The two columns in Table 4 illustrate the difference between codes in the first round and the expanded code list of the second round.

Table 3: Second Round of Descriptive Coding

In-Vivo Code	General Category
“what people want you to say”	Instructor expectation; <b>assessment</b>
“don’t make the same mistake”	assessment

Table 4: Codes Used for Thematic Analysis

First Round Category List	Second Round Category List
Academic Features	Academic Features
Affect	Affect
Assessment	Assessment
Class	Audience
Definition	Class
Instructor Expectation	Definition
Reader Response	Difficulty
Recommendation	Instructor Expectation
Research	Purpose
Student Choice	Recommendation
Style/Voice	Research
Word Choice	Student Choice
Writing Process	Style/Voice
--	Word Choice
--	Writing Process

## DATA

Of all the features of academic writing that the five interviewed students mentioned, style/voice and instructor expectation appeared approximately twice as much as other considerations (compare 27 and 21 to 11 mentions of students' writing processes and 13 mentions of word choice). Other than style and instructors, which fall under the material considerations of academic writing, the most common theme in student responses was affect, or the emotions involved in doing academic writing. Student answers featured an emotional response to academic writing 23 times.

Specific features of academic writing such as purpose, difficulty, audience, and reader response were mentioned fairly equally across the interviews, with 7 mentions of purpose, difficulty, and audience, and 5 mentions of reader response. Students seemed to consider the distinct elements of academic writing as equally weighted, though much less important than instructor expectations and overall style.

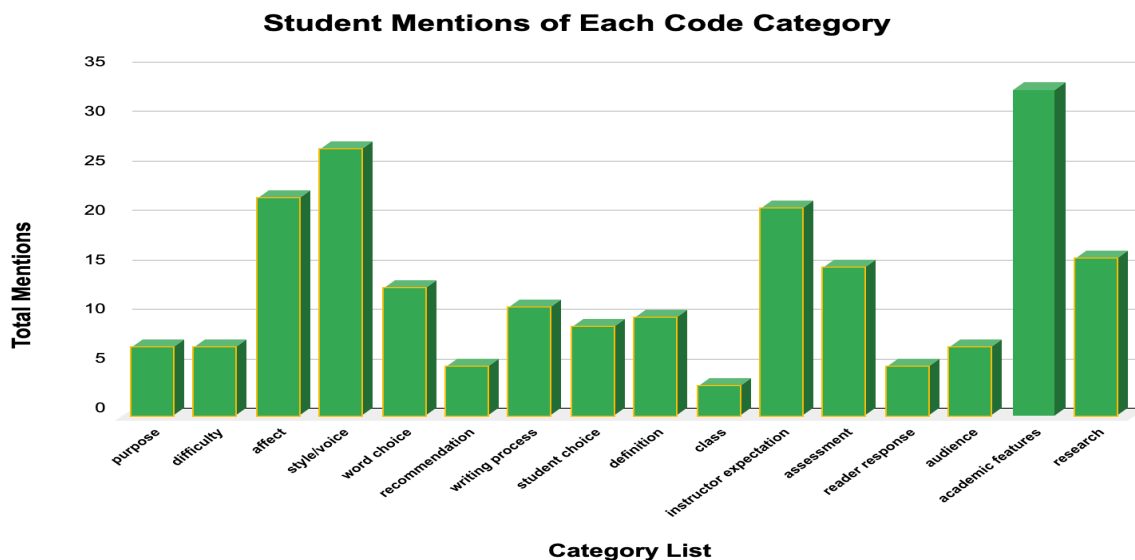


Figure 1. Student Mentions of Each Code Category

When interviewing students, I had no real expectations going into the process about how often certain elements of academic writing would be mentioned. For example, I was uncertain about how students would define academic writing, so I didn't try to predict how often something like instructor expectation would come up. The graph above (Figure 1) works to create a visual representation of just how common each theme was across the student responses. Academic features, the conglomerate of several distinct ideas, was clearly the largest category, but when broken down, the style/voice of academic writing is the primary concern, followed closely by each student's own affect and the expectations of their instructors.

## DISCUSSION

Though my sample size is small, the five students I interviewed consistently brought up several themes. Each of them was concerned with instructor expectations about academic writing, the specific features (such as audience, purpose, and difficulty of the text) of academic writing, the style and word choice associated with academic writing, and their own emotional responses to writing academically. In each of these categories, trends emerged that reveal how these five students (and likely first year writing students more generally) conceive of academic writing.

### Instructor Expectations

Mentioned 21 times by the five students interviewed, the second most common theme in the students' conceptions of academic writing is the influence and expectations of specific instructors. All five students mentioned considering what their instructor wants when defining academic writing. Thomas explicitly mentions the ways in which instructor expectation influences his academic voice:

I feel like writing would be so much fun in my eyes if I didn't have all the set rules to follow...it's gotten to the point where I'll make a joke in a very academic paper and my professor or my teacher from HS, she knew me so she was okay with that, she was like that's how [Thomas] has gotten to write himself out, so I'm used to that now, but going to college, I have to remind myself I can't do that...now I'll still tend to do that in very slight ways where I'll say some random thing or I'll make a little haha funny joke in my paper, but I get yelled at because I made a haha funny joke in my paper, I'm like 'Oh I can't do that.' I understand why we have the concept of writing and all these set rules to make it more easily



acceptable to other people to read it. But I feel like if we could lighten a bit on those rules and we could write like...I dunno, some famous writer I can't think of where they're really relaxed with everything and they use 'but' at the beginning of the sentence or they make a joke in the middle of an essay, yet they're still academically processed, I feel like that is a lot more like what I want to aim towards in a way.

Here, Thomas focuses on the difference between the "rules" of standard academic writing and the ways in which he wishes to write. He mentions making "a little haha funny joke" as something typically unacceptable in an academic setting that gets him "yelled at" by instructors. He advocates for a little more leeway on the rules of writing in Standard American English (though he never uses those specific words) in order to allow students stylistic freedom like some great writers who "are still academically processed." Though he focuses specifically on rules, instructors enforce those rules. Instructors "yell at" students who break the rules--without the instructor influence and emphasis on the rules of academic rhetoric, then Thomas might be able to make jokes. Notably, however, Thomas does acknowledge that rules are necessary for successful communication. The role of the instructor as arbiter isn't all bad or restrictive; Thomas simply requests more leeway.

While Thomas characterizes instructors as interpreter and enforcer of rules, Alex focuses more on how instructors distribute grades and feedback. Alex says, "I think that most of them come...I think the feedback. It's usually feedback you receive that gives you understanding of what people want you to say. And when you see their feedback, usually you don't make the same mistake on the next assignment." Teacher feedback shapes Alex's idea of what is or isn't academic. He notes that feedback lets a student know "what people want [them] to say." The

emphasis here isn't on conveying information, on the types of words used, or even the genre of writing. Instead, it is on professor expectation and on others' expectations more generally. Alex articulates the trouble that students have with seeing the point of writing outside of instructor feedback: he writes based on how instructors might grade him, not necessarily in the way that will be most effective. Alex describes academic writing as something that strips a student of their identity and originality in favor of catering to the expectations of someone else. Further, he does not even frame instructor expectation as inherently reflective of the most effective writing one could do. Rather, Alex's conception of academic writing hinges on the subjective expectations of individual instructors rather than general concepts of what makes a piece of writing effective in general. He even uses the word "mistake" to describe something that an instructor might mark in an essay, which makes it clear that instructor feedback, more than being a guiding tool, acts as something prescriptive. Notably, Alex's answer does not include any affective evaluation of instructor feedback--he is not frustrated or excited by it. Feedback here is simply a tool that leads students to the correct answer.

The problem is that writing rarely has a correct answer. Student response to feedback is hardly a new topic. Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt and Dodie Forrest discuss how students respond to instructor feedback in their article "Conversing in Marginal Spaces: Developmental Writers' Responses to Teacher Comments." They find that students overwhelmingly appreciate instructor feedback and commentary (233). Students care about what instructors have to say and how instructors say it. If Alex's response is any indication, students see feedback as one of the most important parts of academic writing specifically because students link their idea of academic writing so strongly to instructor expectations. Alex's commentary, while that of just one student, reminds instructors that students may see specific expectations--particularly those not explained

through feedback--as random tools used to enforce the subjective and identity-stripping requirements of academic writing.

While Thomas and Alex specifically note instructors as a huge factor in their writing, Scarlett and Maggie reference instructors more obliquely while still counting instructor expectation as a major consideration in academic writing. The two words Scarlett associates with “academic writing” are “school” and “requirements.” Requirements center the expectations of teachers--again, students grapple with the power differential in the classroom that makes students tailor their writing to each instructor’s particular preferences. “School” makes it clear that the only time in which Scarlett sees herself as participating in academic writing is in a class setting. Maggie says, “I think just writing is a basic skill a lot of people need to have and be able to do it correctly...” Like Scarlett, Maggie sees writing as something with a correct form, a set of requirements to meet. In later answers, Scarlett describes a writing process that is rushed and frustrating because of the potential for losing points:

I’m more of a get it all done in one night kinda person so I mean most of my papers are mostly like rushed I would say and mostly I get points off for like not making sense in some areas because I don’t like to reread my papers. It just like I hate it because I just like I wrote it , I already know what’s in it so if I read over it, I already know what it says, I’m not gonna find the errors. I know what I want to say there so.

In her personal experiences, Scarlett rushes her academic writing and avoids rereading because she's “not gonna find the errors.” Scholars Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson write,

students who tracked their growth as writers primarily around “academic” kinds of writing reflected surprisingly narrow beliefs about the possibilities and power

of writing. They commonly saw themselves as “writers” only in the sense that they were able to successfully write for school assignments, and they commonly located evidence of success in writing externally—in an instructor, a grade, or in comparison to other students’ work. (95)

Scarlett’s comments align with Hutton and Gibson’s descriptions. She locates her understanding of herself as a writer squarely within the realm of academics. This leads to her reliance on rushed one-night writing. She even notes that rushing results in “points off” from instructors because she’s so resistant to rereading. Her focus on error and points centers what she perceives as the instructor’s expectations for what constitutes correct academic writing.

Like Thomas and Alex, Ken references instructor expectations as direct influences on how he writes. Perhaps even more than the other students, Ken emphasizes the power that instructors have to, in student’s minds, demand certain features of student writing. He says of academic writing, “Because it’s kind of what’s taught in class really so...I guess like little assignments, even if they’re not papers, you’ll get corrected on things if it’s not in standard English, it seems like and also when you do write papers, a requirement for a lot of those papers is citing sources so.” Ken specifically points out that instructors often communicate, whether through feedback or grades, the supremacy of standard English in academic writing. The power of the instructor shines through in two different ways in Ken’s answer. First, the instructor has the power to “correct” assignments--a student’s academic writing depends on the kinds of things that an instructor will choose to correct or ignore. Second, in Ken’s opinion, the instructor upholds the dominance of standard American English. The other major features of academic writing according to Ken are “writing about something I don’t want to write about. Because it’s kinda what the professor wants.” The professor is the ultimate judge of standards and

expectations, making academic writing a difficult concept for students to pin down. Sondra Perl, in “Understanding Composing,” writes,

1) Although projective structuring is only one important part of the composing process, many writers act as if it is the whole process. These writers focus on what they think others want them to write rather than looking to see what it is they want to write. As a result, they often ignore their felt sense and they do not establish a living connection between themselves and their topic.

2) Many writers reduce projective structuring to a series of rules or criteria for evaluating finished discourse. These writers ask, “Is what I'm writing correct?” and “Does it conform to the rules I've been taught?” (368)

Perl describes the exact same two things that Ken mentions. When he writes, Ken feels he must write about what the instructor wants him to write about--and in the way the instructor wants him to write it. He also must consider whether it “conforms to the rules [he has] been taught.”

It is clear across the student interviews that instructor expectations are a huge piece of how students understand academic writing. Instructors have the power to assess writing, to enforce the hegemony of Standard American English, to write the assignment requirements and set the parameters.

#### Affect/Emotion

The intention of this study is to get a preliminary understanding of how students view academic writing. In pursuit of this goal, it is important to take into account students as whole people--whole people who have both intellectual and emotional responses to the demands of academic writing. The students I interviewed mentioned emotion or affect in relation to academic writing twenty-one times, the third most of all the topics. No scholar would deny that

students' emotions about academic writing shape their views, however there is little explicit scholarly engagement with those emotions. The students interviewed for this study feel overwhelmingly negative about academic writing because of their lack of agency and the enforcement of rigid but inconsistent standards. Scholar Laura R. Micciche, in a recent retrospective article about her book on emotion in the classroom, says,

In whatever form or focus, there is more call than ever to stay with emotion—whether in our personal lives, classrooms, writing, or political commitments. Staying with emotion is staying with others, for, without others, emotion has no meaning or effect. In that sense I see the power of emotion studies still in its ability to foreground how coalitions of people, of causes, of diverse others come together and/or break apart.

Scholars are increasingly engaged with emotion across disciplines in ways that challenge traditional structures of emotion and logic as an oppositional binary. Students' emotions give instructors insight into ways that academic writing can oppress or obfuscate an important aspect of human experience. They also give us insight into what classroom structures related to academic writing make students straight-up feel bad--which I say knowing that "straight-up bad" is not the most academic or specific phrase, but is the aptest description I have for the sense of general negativity that pervades student opinions on academic writing. Instructors and scholars are overwhelmingly engaged in work to make the student experience better, more engaging, more effective, and more equal (to name only a few, the work of Villanueva, Sommers, and Yancey all come to mind). One of the projects of writing studies centers improving student experiences, so discussing what makes those experiences negative can only add to this work.

Thomas had the most positive comments about academic writing and about how to create an atmosphere that encourages students to enjoy academic writing. The paper that Thomas remembers as “most fun” is a paper that he wrote as a high schooler. His teacher let the students select “any topic we want,” so Thomas wrote about black holes--his then-current favorite topic. He says, “it was very fun in a way to use big words, and enlightening to take all those big words I learned when I was reading about massive black holes and just sum up what black holes were...” There is a theme among the interviewees’ answers of preferring writing wherein professors or teachers allow students to self-select a topic. The element of choice gives students a degree of creative freedom in their papers. They feel some ownership over the assignment because they are responsible for choosing such a large element of the paper, even if the instructor has other more strict requirements. The “big words” that feature so prominently in so many answers as a box to be ticked or an obstacle to overcome now become something fun to incorporate because Thomas is passionate about his topic.

Later in the interview, Thomas describes a frustrating but illuminating experience reading academic writing as part of his research for a paper. He says, “By the second page I was like done with it because it’s boring, there’s nothing to keep me motivated other than just learning about this information.” He feels that the experience was “boring” because it lacked a narrative and a distinct style and voice. To Thomas, academic writing currently resembles the report he read. It is meant only to inform and cannot feature much of a voice. Thomas argues that it would be much more interesting and engaging to write and read academic writing if students could put some of their own personality into the text. This means that Thomas sees academic writing as a space that is hostile to an expressive or emotive style or voice. Thomas’s comments align with

the work of scholars like Laura Micciche who investigates emotion's value as an epistemological tool. Micciche says,

As racial violence crowds domestic headlines and terrorist attacks become commonplace occurrences in the U.S. and abroad, I'm more convinced than ever of the need to understand how emotion circulates, is embodied, and creates effects. Emotion studies provide a critical vocabulary for making sense of the world and for investigating smaller scenes—classrooms and professional arenas.

In Micciche's terms, Thomas notes that academic writing doesn't engage with emotion and refuses to participate in the process of emotional circulation. Its dry and boring nature leads academic writing to not only be frustrating for students, but to actively remove itself from crucial (and emotional) discourses. In other words, academic writing actually seems less effective to students because it refuses to engage with emotion as a valuable way to create and circulate knowledge.

Of all the students, Scarlett's answers feature the most negative language around academic writing. She feels that academic writing is forced and frustrating, more of a chore than a way to investigate new ideas or convey those ideas to an audience. She says, "I would say academic [writing] is more forced and my creative writing I just write what I want and I get to decide what I want for it and then school is more like this is what it has to be and you have to write this." Scarlett focuses on how unpleasant and frustrating academic writing is for her. Words like "forced" and "you have to write this" make it clear that the element of choice is not present for Scarlett in her academic writing experiences. She also differentiates between academic writing and creative writing. To Scarlett, creative writing involves a much larger degree of creative and intellectual freedom. She not only can control the topic, but can also



decide what the purpose of her writing is. Academic writing, on the other hand, features a prescribed topic and purpose that makes Scarlett feel like her writing is “forced.” Scarlett’s emotional response to writing emerges naturally out of her frustration: later in the interview, she describes how she “hate[s] it so much.” Even when she's describing acceptable writing experiences, they're nothing more than “alright.” At no point does Scarlett find academic writing to be something that makes her feel passionate or excited.

Like Scarlett, Ken feels that academic writing is forced and frustrating. Ken’s frustration, however, stems from the subjective nature of writing assessment. First, he says, “I don’t particularly like writing papers; it’s not a passion of mine, never will be...” Academic writing, in Ken’s estimation, becomes a chore--something he does because he’s required to, not because he finds purpose or passion in it. His most impassioned frustration with academic writing, however, comes with different instructor standards. Ken says,

I don’t really like English classes in general because it seems like, compared to other classes like math, it’s subjective, you can get a different grade from each professor wherein math you should get the same grade for each thing. Like say you have an exam and you turn it in to a professor from math and you have five professors grade it, it should be the same grade but in English it seems like it wouldn’t be because of how a professor will look at your writing and how they grade.

Ken has strongly negative feelings about academic writing (particularly in English) because of the subjective nature of its assessment. He argues that it's not like math, where you get the same grade on the same exam no matter who is grading it. Professor expectation plays a big role in Ken's conception of what constitutes academic writing, but so does the idea that a piece of

academic writing that might be acceptable in one class wouldn't be in another. There is no way to fully standardize writing assessment--nor should there be because a thousand students write in a thousand different ways--but Ken makes a good case for making grading policies and practices as transparent as possible. The perceived subjectivity in grading policies creates a barrier between students and emotional investment in the material they write. Bruce Ballenger and Kelly Myers, in their 2019 article on emotion and revision, write,

As writing teachers, we want our students to care about their writing. We want them to be motivated to return to their drafts and wrestle with big ideas through revision, and we tend to think of caring as an unequivocally good state. Caring, however, is complicated, in that it is intimately linked to feelings of vulnerability. Aspiring writers have a sense of hope, and that hope creates a precarious teetering between optimism and self-doubt. (591)

Ken's understanding of writing as an exercise in instructor-pleasing instead of as work that he should be interested in highlights a new dimension in which caring can be precarious for students. Not only does caring lead to vulnerability, caring can lead to feelings of frustration and anger at seemingly incongruous and trivial feedback. Ballenger and Myers consider the ways in which students can take feedback as particularly harsh, and Ken's frustration with subjectivity in the writing process bears that out.

### Word Choice

Mentioned only twelve distinct times in the interviews, one of the most extensively discussed concerns among the five students interviewed was academic word choice. Word choice could fall under the wider header of "academic features" but the students described the effects of word choice so distinctly that it merits its own discussion section. Thomas, Max, Ken,

Scarlett, and Maggie all mention using specific types of words in academic writing that they might not use elsewhere. This is notable because none of the interview questions directly reference word choice. The closest interview question simply asks them to describe what makes a piece of writing “academic” in their opinion. That they each mention word choice--not jargon or specialized language, but literally the literacy level of the words that they use--indicates that students see larger and more complicated words as hallmarks of academic writing.

Thomas describes academic writing as a way to teach others--and views academic language as a way to support that purpose. He says,

I see it [academic writing] as something that is meant to fill a purpose...like, I’m not much of a writer myself, but I can understand how academic writing is something that’s meant to inform and teach in a way to either your professor or just a group of people. That’s the first thing that comes to my mind is like “Oh I’m writing this paper as a ‘teaching thing’ so that there’s something to look back on and learn about something,” so it could be on black holes or people in high positions or how the school works or something like that.

Here, Thomas focuses on using easily readable language in order to clearly convey one's purpose to the audience. To Thomas, academic writing involves an element of “teaching” the reader something. No matter the topic, from black holes to biographical writing, academic writing’s purpose is to inform. Interestingly, Thomas mentions two potential audiences: professors or “just a group of people.” Among the interviewees, he is alone in this understanding, as the rest of the students describe academic writing as dense and difficult to understand. He does note that “if it’s too complicated, readers get turned off, they’re like ‘whatever.’” Like the other students, Thomas acknowledges that complicated writing can make readers feel uninterested in the topic. He hits

on the problem that the other interviewees describe in more detail: that academic writing can sometimes be so complicated, it becomes difficult to get through.

The student who had the most to say about appropriate academic word choice is Alex, who describes writing with the literacy level of the reader in mind. He says,

To be quite honest, I always try to sound academic. There is something I try to do when I write...it's so called something like "literacy level" you know when it gives you approximation of how literate should be the reader and of course I try to keep it quite high, you know, above 10, like 10 something because that's also internal feedback, automatic feedback and I think that...sorry, I switched gears, jumped to other topic, but yep I think it gives me first approximation of how academic it is and also when I read other texts when I see that they're really written in very simple language, they don't sound academic for me.

Alex mentions "literacy level" and notes that "simple language...[doesn't] sound very academic."

Simple language can include the absence of specialized jargon or even just simple sentence construction. Academic writing, to Alex, uses the kinds of words and phrases that indicate a high level of education. One reason for this is that the assumed audience for academic work are other people working from a collegiate or higher reading level or understanding of the topic. Alex says,

I think because initially you think that more educated reader is reading that and you...that's also a feature of academic writing is that reader is considered to be more educated than just plain person and that's why you try to keep your language not just, you know, simple: "I tell" "I do" but you sometimes use

convoluted words with French origin sometimes and you think that it makes them sound more....something, I don't know.

Readers of academic writing are “more educated than just plain person” in his mind because academic writing is oriented toward people who have completed post-secondary education. Alex even mentions specific examples of simple language: “I tell” or “I do.” Instead of these, Alex notes that academic writing uses “convoluted words with French origin.” Academic writing in English literally relies on a completely different root language because the academy culturally regards Latinate words more highly than Germanic words. Bruce Maylath takes up this very distinction in his 1996 article about lexical impact on writing assessment. Maylath surveys 90 writing instructors from different institutions and at different points in their careers to determine if they prefer Greco-Latinate words, Anglo-Saxon words, or writing that blends the two. Maylath finds that most instructors prefer writing with a blend of the two, though “a goodly number favored the extremes” (220). One of the groups that favors the extremes--in this case, the Greco-Latinate words--is primarily comprised of younger instructors with an average of nine months' experience. These instructors with less experience, like Alex, favor language that speaks to an arbitrary marker of literacy and an understanding of academic writing as less accessible and more convoluted. Though Maylath's findings overall don't confirm Alex's suspicions, it is still telling that younger instructors and Alex believe those convoluted French words to be more academically valuable than smaller, less complex words. They see academic writing as something meant to be more obscure or unreadable without certain types of training and a certain level of literacy. In other words, Alex views academic writing as inaccessible by design--a viewpoint often shared by instructors with minimal experience in the field.

Like Alex, Maggie sees “intelligent” or complex word choice as an important part of the academic writing process. The literacy level of writers and readers determine if writing is academic. For more in-depth examinations of literacy as a construct, see the works of Deborah Brandt, Shirley Brice Heath, and Ellen Cushman (among others). In describing what makes writing academic, Maggie says “Well, one, because I’m paying for it. And then another one because we see/or we’re given student examples sometimes when we’re assigned to write a paper and I read through them and then I try to make mine sound as intelligent, if you wanna say, like theirs.” Maggie specifically tries to “make [her own] writing sound as intelligent” as student examples. Implicit here is the value students and instructors place on “sounding intelligent.” If her explanation of a concept doesn’t sound complex, then it doesn’t meet Maggie’s standard for academic writing. Elaborating on what makes something “sound intelligent,” Maggie says, “I think in my rhetoric analysis, there’s a few spots in it, I think when I try to make it sound like that, sometimes I go back and read it and then there’s like basic words in it. I go and find more educated words and put it in there.” Thomas, Alex, and Maggie all focus on using “big words” or “more educated words” or, of course, “convoluted words of French origin” in order to avoid basic or simple language. This group of students clearly correlates word choice with perceived intelligence and, from there, correlates perceived intelligence with academic writing. These students see some words as more intelligent, more academic, and more appropriate for academic writing than others. These words tend to be longer, to be of French rather than Germanic origin, and to be more specialized than “basic words.”

Scarlett and Ken, too, see academic writing as dependent on specific word choice that contributes to a sense of disconnect between the writer and their work. Scarlett describes academic writing as reliant on “word choice or like sometimes if people like drone on, I feel like

that's also kind of academic because they don't want to do it and you can also tell through their writing sometimes." The specific features that Scarlett attributes to academic writing include "word choice"--particularly a writing style that tends to "drone on" because the writers "don't want to do it." Every part of this answer characterizes academic writing as unpleasant to write and read. The word "drone" in particular brings up the image of someone talking endlessly about something absolutely banal. It carries with it the image of an almost Charlie-Brown-Teacher-esque inability for the audience to understand or care about what the speaker is saying. Ken, too, focuses on word choice. He says,

It seems like academic writing has...you have to really use like standard English, you can't really write the way you want. That's a pretty big feature it seems like because if you don't then professors seem to dock you so...I guess and then citing sources is a pretty big thing...those are the two main points that I can think of that would separate from any other writing that I would do I guess.

Ken's point about Standard American English. Ken particularly characterizes academic writing as a space in which a student "can't write the way you want." In choosing words and crafting papers, students must focus on what will sound the most acceptable, the most standard, and the most in-line with what professors want.

While many instructors and scholars of composition follow guidelines meant to disabuse students of the notion that their own voices shouldn't matter, such as the CCCC statement on "Students' Right to Their Own Language", it is clear that the group of students in this study are not receiving that message. The "Students' Right to Their Own Language" statement says,

We have also taught, many of us, as though the "English of educated speakers," the language used by those in power in the community, had an inherent advantage

over other dialects as a means of expressing thought or emotion, conveying information, or analyzing concepts. We need to discover whether our attitudes toward “educated English” are based on some inherent superiority of the dialect itself or on the social prestige of those who use it. We need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins. (3)

The main point of the “Students' Right to Their Own Language” is to remind instructors that no dialect of English is inherently superior to any other and that students should be able and encouraged to use their own voices in the classroom. Students such as Ken and Scarlett, however, clearly feel that the “English of educated speakers” *is* reinforced in the composition classroom. Alex, too, comments on the importance of convoluted and intelligent-sounding language in academic writing. Thomas notes consistently that he wishes he could inject his personality and voice into his writing.

Somewhere along the way, at least in the view of the five students I interviewed, students lose that right to their own language, compelled to replace their voice with the voice of the academy--a voice overwhelmingly aligned with whiteness. The CCCC “Statement on White Language Supremacy” finalized in May of 2021 says,

WLS assists white supremacy by using language to control reality and resources by defining and evaluating people, places, things, reading, writing, rhetoric, pedagogies, and processes in multiple ways that damage our students and our democracy: it imposes a world view that is simultaneously pro white, cisgender,



male, heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, racist and capitalist. (Inoue, 2019b; Pritchard, 2017). This worldview structures WLS as the default condition in schools, academic disciplines, professions, media, and society at large.

White Language Supremacy (WLS) affects each of the students I interviewed because they all understand academic writing to have a sort of default voice, a specific type of vocabulary. They view the academic voice as the default way to write for an academic environment--a default from which instructors and assessment often frustratingly prevent their deviation. The “Statement on White Language Supremacy” defines six habits of White Language Supremacy (WLS):

- Unseen, Naturalized Orientation to the World
- Hyperindividualism
- Stance of Neutrality, Objectivity, and Apoliticality
- Individualized, Rational, Controlled Self
- Rule-Governed, Contractual Relationships
- Clarity, Order, and Control (Inoue, 2019a; 2019c; 2021)

Thomas, Alex, Ken, Scarlett, and Maggie all note stances of neutrality and objectivity in academic writing as well as the concept of this academic voice as the natural, unseen baseline expectation for writing. Though the students don’t explicitly frame their frustrations as responses to WLS, they still engage with the exact framework that composition scholarship is working to dismantle.

#### Academic Features

In their interviews, the students mentioned several types of considerations that make writing projects fall under the category of “academic.” Strikingly, the students all mentioned similar features: the presence of research and citations, considerations about audience, and a

highly structured form. These features all indicate academic purpose to the students. I'm performing this research at one institution for which there is a cohesive first year writing program, so some of this similarity across interviews likely springs from what we specifically teach. The features students mentioned, however, are consistent enough across both the interviews and the academic genre that generalizations from these interviews do not seem out of the realm of reality. Our program may focus more on audience, for example, than others, but first year writing scholarship and composition theory has discussed the importance of writing for real audiences extensively. It is likely that other institutions place a similar importance on audience when teaching first year composition. Therefore, though these students' answers might differ slightly from the answers I would get from students at other universities, the themes of their answers are generalizable.

Thomas focused much of his interview on the idea that academic writing should be serious. He describes the conclusion of a paper, saying,

And like the conclusion is really about wrapping everything up. You have to lose that attitude of look at my paper, look at how interesting it is. And sum up that information that you've already written about and how that concludes something. I feel like when it comes to conclusions, that's the most academic part of the paper because like enough fooling around, here's what this paper is about, this is what it did, this is what it taught you, this is what you're supposed to gain from it in a way.

Thomas finds the conclusion of the paper to be the most academic section because, as he says, that is when a writer must say "enough fooling around." A writer should no longer rely on jokes or attention-getters as in an introductory hook--instead, a conclusion is where serious reflection

takes place. It is just that seriousness that makes a conclusion seem “most” academic to Thomas. The idea that academic writing cannot be fun or even funny is very prominent in Thomas’s answers, as he mentions later that he sometimes has to eliminate jokes from his writing in order to make it sound more appropriate for an academic situation. Thomas discusses academic writing as something bereft of personality and vitality--an opinion that echoes Matsuda and Tardy’s work on voice in academic articles--which makes it hard to read and even harder to write.

Alex, like Thomas, focuses on a student’s lack of choice when it comes to academic writing, but he also highlights the importance of secondary sources and research to the academic writing process. Alex says,

[laughs] First of all, if somebody asks me about a topic, it means the topic is given to me. That’s seldom that you pick a topic that is whatever you want. That’s the first feature that comes to my mind. Second feature is that it should sound more trustful, more credible source. Because when your writing is personal, you don’t need any information, anything. Also it should be very, I would try to say unbiased, maybe I’ll say unbiased. Because you know in our speech sometimes...because our academic writing is sometimes read by a broader audience than usually more private writings, that is why you should usually try to be non-discriminatory...those are the three most that come from the top of my head.

Alex highlights teacher-selected topics as particularly indicative of academic writing. He also focuses on the prominence of cited sources and research in academic writing. Students, especially in first year writing, learn to cite sources and rely on other perspectives to support (or even rebut) their arguments. This, to Alex, is a hallmark of academic writing in general: a works

cited page filled with other resources that a reader can consult. Thomas E. Recchio, in “A Bakhtinian Reading of Student Writing” agrees that sources are an integral part of writerly development. Recchio says, “In order for the student to begin to realize her own voice, she has to liberate it from the other voices in the paper, not in a process of rejecting those voices but in managing them, using them as a background against which she can sound her own” (450). Students learn to integrate sources not as the primary authorities, but as respected tools that help buttress and support an argument or a piece of research. Finally, Alex characterizes academic writing as “unbiased” and “non-discriminatory.” He frames the concept of unbiased writing not as something frustrating or stifling, but as a feature of academic writing that allows a scholar to make an argument based on objectivity or that provides a more balanced perspective on a topic. The idea of an objective position can work in two ways, however. The first is favorable, in the sense that Alex seems to mean it: as a way to provide a good-faith analysis of some problem or good-faith answer to some question. The second, however, may contribute to the idea of some student writing as “robot-writing” (Gemmell): unbiased and objective can also read as personality-less and value-neutral, two features that Thomas especially notes as frustrating and stifling to both readers and writers.

Other than the specific themes described in more detail in the other sections, Scarlett focuses mostly on academic writing as highly form-focused and extremely specific to writing for classes. She describes learning how to write a paper as “I was mostly taught like write your thesis with your like 3 things and then like have each paragraph be that thing and then like have three like sur-topics I guess or sub-topics below it. It’s like the information in your topic like paragraph. It’s bad.” Scarlett’s writerly education has focused on the common AP or 5-paragraph essay that includes “a thesis with your...three things,” and asks that “each paragraph be that

thing.” Bartholomae describes the process of learning how to write academically as a process of gradually learning the hallmarks of a specialized discourse. He says,

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned.’ (5)

Scarlett assembles and mimics the language of the university by writing to what she views as strict and specific form requirements. Her rigid adherence to the intro-thesis-body-conclusion model of writing reinforces Bartholomae’s description of academic discourse as a language unto itself. Like a student of Latin practicing declensions and conjugations, Scarlett becomes more familiar with academic writing by practicing the forms that instructors have enforced as “correct” for academic essays. Scarlett notes that “it’s bad” to write to such strict requirements, speaking to the kind of discomfort this unfamiliarity with the language of the academy inspires in students.

Like Scarlett, Maggie sees academic writing as a structured endeavor and, again like the others, sees source citation as integral to a successful academic paper. Maggie says,

When I think of academic writing, I think of it as a big process and when I think of that process I think of obviously your intro, your middle, and your body, or

your conclusion, excuse me, and then to try to incorporate those ethos logos pathos and kairos in it to try to add more to your paper and make it sound a lot better than people just writing and it doesn't really make a lot of sense, you know what I mean?

Maggie's academic writing is distinct from "people just writing" because of its rigorous structure. The structure here includes use of rhetorical appeals and tools. Interestingly, Maggie describes academic writing as a "big process" but describes a relatively static final product that includes a checklist of components. One of those components is research. She says, "I think just doing a lot of research and finding the accurate information instead of sounding uninformed so I can write with that type of information and then just going back and finding the basic words and putting in more...yeah." Again, she cites source use as an important feature of academic writing. A major part of academic writing is learning how to cite those who have researched the topic before in order to lend credence to one's own argument. Academic writing relies upon citing other scholars who are, hopefully, known and respected in the field in order to project a sense of intellectual engagement with the conversations that define that field. Nancy Sommers in "Between the Drafts" writes that

It is in the thrill of the pull between someone else's authority and our own, between submission and independence that we must discover how to define ourselves. In the uncertainty of that struggle, we have a chance of finding the voice of our own authority. Finding it, we can speak convincingly ... at long last.

(31)

Thomas, Alex, Ken, Maggie, and Scarlett all see that pull as a defining feature of academic writing. They embody an emerging sense of authority and describe their own distinct journeys toward finding that authority.

## CONCLUSION

### Pedagogical Implications

Thomas, Ken, Max, Scarlett, and Maggie, in their “final thoughts on writing” that I asked for in each interview, all presented opinions on how to make academic writing more engaging. One of the major themes among their answers was that students are more inclined to feel frustrated by academic writing when instructors don’t give them a choice of what topic to write about. Even within given parameters, choice of topic helps students feel more connected to the academic writing they produce for classes. Pedagogically, this might translate in a number of ways. An instructor could provide

1. Several options from which students may choose their topics,
2. An open prompt that invites students to answer it using the examples they see as most relevant and interesting,
3. An open-ended project that asks students to write on a subject of their choice within certain genre conventions (like an open research paper).

Giving students the ability to choose acknowledges their status as growing scholars and writers who can make their own writerly decisions and who have interests and ideas beyond what one might expect in a writing classroom. Choices also drive students to feel more invested in their own work because they have a part in constructing the prompt.

Other than student choice, the most relevant theme among the five students for instructors is the concept that academic writing is only for instructors to read. The students overwhelmingly note that academic writing, far from being easy to define, often depends on the individual instructor. The students focused in particular on “what instructors want,” which is antithetical to one of composition theory’s central aims: students should write for real audiences. To combat



this perspective, instructors may want to make clear the purposes of different evaluation methods. The scope of this particular study doesn't encompass what types of evaluation are most helpful, but many scholars of first year writing and composition have taken up that question. Further, the answers these students have given indicate that more research should be conducted into how students *feel* about academic writing and the feedback they receive on it. Ballenger and Myers have begun this work, but their focus is solely on revision, not on general student emotions about academic writing as a whole. The students clearly have opinions about academic writing, but there needs to be more research with a wider sample population in order to come up with truly generalizable conclusions about student affect.

#### Final Thoughts

The five students in this study make it clear that academic writing is difficult to define and that they often see it as frustrating, instructor-based, and boring. The student perspective on writing is indispensable to composition studies as a discipline (see again Johnson's arresting observation that composition scholarship represents students approximately once a paragraph), and this case is no exception. If composition instructors aim to teach students the tools and techniques of academic writing in order to aid those students in their writerly and scholarly development, then that aim is lost somewhere along the way. Rather than, as Hutton and Gibson suggest, providing "students with more integrative language and constructs for students' own sense of their writing and their development as writers, in which the generation and the communication of thought through writing can be experienced and understood to always be working in tandem" (111), the students in this study see instructors as enforcers of arbitrary and oppressive standards that ultimately make no sense. While a main project of composition studies is to make the student experience better in every sense of the word: to advance opportunity (Poe

et al), to enact linguistic justice (“Students’ Right to Their Own Language”, “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!”, and “Statement on White Language Supremacy”), to illuminate the hidden power structures of language (Delpit), to amplify student voices (Schnee and Shakoor), and more. Instead, academic writing and the teaching of it is misunderstood by students as a boring exercise intended to sap them of their creativity and individuality so that they can produce writing that sounds like what they imagine academic writing to be: boring, dry, and awkward with big words that don’t really mean anything. Academic writing, to the contrary, can be revolutionary, but somewhere between instructors’ enthusiasm and students’ understanding, that revolution gets mangled and garbled and comes out the other end looking positively bereft of radical possibility. Student perspectives help scholars identify and then work to fix that disconnect. Only through considering how students understand academic writing can scholars bridge the gap between the revolutionary possibility of scholarship and the composition classroom.

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