

A Review of *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*

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Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki. *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines:
Research on the Academic Writing Life*.
Boynton/Cook Heinemann Press, 2006. 186 pages.

ANY BOOK THAT TRIES to define academic writing bites off more than most can chew. Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki defining academic writing is one part of a larger goal in their book *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*. Not only do they develop a definition of academic writing, they also build a developmental model for stages students move through to enter the academic conversation. I admit to being skeptical when I read the introduction of the book and saw how ambitious Thaiss and Zawacki were. If one has read David Russell's *Writing in Academic Disciplines*, one knows the long, slow march academia has taken toward disciplinary specialization. Still, I hear WAC program directors and faculty reify academic writing without ever being able to adequately describe it. Instead, the more concrete their description, the more problematic the definition becomes. Thaiss and Zawacki tackle the challenge of defining academic writing through a large-scale study involving surveys, case studies, assessment workshops, focus groups, department rubrics, and writing samples.

There is no suspense in the book; Thaiss and Zawacki define three standards for academic writing on pages five and six. I will spare you the suspense as well. Here are their findings: "1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study ... 2. The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception ... 3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response." Of course, these

standards are abstract, and the rest of the book fleshes out what those might look like in practice and how students grow as writers and scholars to achieve them.

The book is broken into five chapters. The first introduces the book and abstractly defines academic writing and alternative discourses. Though arguably most of the book is focused on traditional academic discourse, Thaiss and Zawacki also examine alternative discourses as a way to define traditional discourse and to try to shed light on the kinds of writing academics do in non-academic settings. They define alternatives in five ways based on their findings: alternative formats, ways of conceptualizing and arranging academic arguments, syntaxes, methodologies, and media (12). All of these repeat throughout the book and play an important part in how faculty view writing and the kinds of writing faculty ask students to produce.

The second chapter details the kinds of writing faculty do within the academic context and alternatives to it, and the third examines how faculty teach students to write. These chapters have the data to explain the standards for academic writing. They contain narratives of faculty describing their writing, and professional writing the faculty admire, and how they try to teach students to enter the academic conversation. The narratives are compelling in places and exemplify the kinds of faculty most institutions have, ranging from fairly conservative writers who rigidly conform to academic conventions to those exploring radically different alternatives. In all of these cases, faculty seem to really understand the complexity of writing and that different aims mean different approaches to tasks. The narratives are nuanced and show the complexity of the work academics do. The cases also show that faculty care deeply about their students and ask them to write similar kinds of texts as they themselves produce.

Late in chapter three, Thaiss and Zawacki examine department rubrics and come to some unsurprising conclusions that echo the work of John Bean and Margot Soven. They found that the rubrics repeat “‘generic academic’ terminology, but that disciplinary nuances are much harder to discern” (86). Terms such as evidence, organization, audience, and thesis repeatedly appeared, but different disciplines defined those things differently. Here the authors find evidence of their overarching standards as well as the individuality disciplines display.

After hearing from the faculty, Thaiss and Zawacki turn to students to learn about their experiences with writing, something few scholars have looked at with this breadth and depth. This is an area writing scholars need to dig deeper into, and this book provides tremendous groundwork. From their research, presented in chapter four, Thaiss and Zawacki posit three stages for the development of a disciplinary writer:

1. A first stage in which the writer bases a sense of disciplinary consistency on writing experience in very few courses with criteria in these courses generalized into “rules.”
2. A second stage in which the writer encounters different exigencies in different courses, and the sense of inconsistency, sometimes interpreted as teacher idiosyncrasy, supplants the perception of consistency.
3. A third stage, described above, in which the writer understands the differences as components of an articulated, nuanced idea of the discipline. (109–110)

The rest of the chapter fleshes out these stages, finding that disciplinary writing is much more personal than some might believe, needing passion, voice, and reflection. Also, the findings here exemplify that students use feedback in more complex ways than one might expect. Students use the feedback for cumulative learning of disciplinary conventions as well as an understanding of individual faculty member’s idiosyncrasies. The picture painted of students here is complex and provides helpful information for WAC program directors and faculty who want to better understand student learning and motivation.

The final chapter, “Implications for Teaching and Program Building,” doesn’t offer radical insight or new ways to teach writing or run writing programs. Nearly all of the suggestions, as noted by the authors, appear in many other places such as the WAC Clearinghouse, but this text does something most of the sources for that information do not. It provides pages and pages of data gleaned from interviews, surveys, rubrics, and essays, enough for one to chew on for quite some time. It provides the kinds of information that faculty can appreciate and use to guide their own practice. This book is an excellent resource for faculty and WAC program directors who want scholarship that provides insight and support for their work, and it is a necessary addition for WAC program directors’ bookshelves.