

ENGL 2089 Honors Essay #3 (Ethnography of a Discourse Community)

Adapted from *Writing about Writing*

Background:

So far we have examined the concept of literacy by analyzing our own literacy experiences and by studying literacy as a wider social construct involving genres. For the third prong of this course's inquiry (research as a lived and studied practice), you will experience the role of ethnographic researcher and focus on the meaning of discourse community.

Assignment:

Using the criteria suggested by John Swales in “The Concept of Discourse Community,” choose a discourse community that has made (or you expect will make) an impact on you, preferably as related in some way to your major field of study in college (or perhaps one that simply interests you, whether or not you're a member of it) and explore its goals, characteristics, and individual interactions. Then choose a particular point of interest or issue within that discourse community to examine in more detail. Investigate and analyze how literacy functions within that discourse community and how texts mediate the group's activities. Bring in references to the articles we've read for class (more than just Swales') to help you make meaning of the discourse community you're studying. Present your research in a paper of at least 7 – 10 pages that describes the discourse community and explores the particular research question on which you are focusing. Use the data you collect to make and support your claims. You need to show a clear understanding of what discourse communities are and to demonstrate your ability to analyze them carefully and thoughtfully. Do not simply list the features of the discourse community and how it fulfills Swales' criteria but also explore in some depth a particular issue within that community. You may add an illustration or two, if helpful. As always, you should use correct MLA format and include a Works Cited page (perhaps even appendices). You will also do a Research Proposal to help you focus your research. Due dates are on the Daily Schedule.

Audience:

Think of your audience as not just the teacher but also your classmates and anyone with an interest in the meaning and value of literacy as it functions within a discourse community.

Data Collection:

- *Observe members of the discourse community* while they are engaged in a shared activity; take detailed notes. (What are they doing? What kinds of things do they say? What do they write? How do you know who is “in” and who is “out”?)
- *Collect anything people in that community read or write* (their genres) – even very short things like forms, sketches, notes, IMs, and text messages.
- *Interview at least one member of the discourse community and/or conduct a multi-member survey.* Record (with permission) and transcribe the interview and/or survey responses. You might ask questions about the person's interest and involvement in the

community, what that person has learned (especially with regard to the group's literate practices), what *lexis* terms the group has, and how the members communicate with people inside and outside the group.

Data Analysis:

First, analyze the data you collect by using the six characteristics of Swales' idea of a discourse community. Remember that he said the six characteristics are "necessary and sufficient." So if you find all six present, then you have a discourse community. If not, then either you've missed something (look again) or you have to find another group. Some questions to be answered:

- What are the shared goals of the community? Why does it exist? What does it do?
- What mechanisms do members use to communicate with each other (meetings, conventions, phone calls, e-mail, text messages, apps, web sites, newsletters, reports, publications, evaluation forms, etc.)?
- What are the purposes of each of these mechanisms of communication (to improve performance, make money, share resources, teach better, cultivate a better garden, etc.)?
- Which of these mechanisms of communication can be considered *genres* (textual responses to recurring situations that all group members recognize and understand)?
- What kinds of specialized language (*lexis*) do group members use in their conversations and in their genres? Give some examples – ELL, on the fly, 86, etc. What communicative function does this *lexis* serve? Why use it?
- Who are the "veteran" members with expertise? Who are the newcomers with less expertise? How can you spot them? How do newcomers learn the appropriate language, genres, knowledge of the group?

The above questions will give you an overall picture of the discourse community. Next, you'll need to focus more sharply on what you've learned to find something that is especially interesting, confusing, or illuminating. Use Swales, Johns, Wardle, and other researchers to help you. In trying to determine what to focus on, you might ask yourself questions such as:

- Are there conflicts within the community? If so, what are they? Why do the conflicts occur? How are they negotiated, mediated, resolved? Do texts help mediate/make worse these conflicts in some way?
- Do any genres help the community work toward its goals especially effectively – or keep the community from working toward its goals? How so?
- Do some participants in the community have difficulty speaking and writing there? Why? Are there ways (formal or informal) that help newcomers fit in?
- Who has authority here? What is that authority based on? How is that authority demonstrated in written and oral language? Does authority seem to be shared? Maybe challenged?
- Are members of the community stereotyped in any way (positive or negative) in regard to their level of literacy knowledge in the group? If so, why?

Planning and Drafting:

As you develop answers to some of these questions, start setting some priorities. Now that you have observed and analyzed the data you have collected on this discourse community, what do you want to focus most on in your paper? Is there something intriguing regarding the goals of the community and how those goals are pursued? Conflicts in the community? The *lexis* and mediating genres? Verbal and written evidence of authority or enculturation in the community? In other words, are the research questions you posed in your Research Proposal workable, or do you need to refine them? All of your research should eventually lead you to a thesis statement as you analyze your findings.

In terms of organization, keep in mind what we've discussed about hooking the audience. Also, please remember the other article by Swales that we've read: "Create a Research Space (CARS) Model of Research Introductions." Thus, your paper should:

- Establish the territory by providing a brief overview of the existing literature (published research) on the topic. You can use articles from our readings and articles you've found on your own as they might relate to the particular discourse community (or a similar one) that you've studied.
- Establish a niche ("But we do not know Y" or "No one has looked at X.")
- Explain how you will occupy the niche.
- Describe your research methodology.
- Discuss your findings in detail (using the assigned texts and outside sources as appropriate – quote from the people you interviewed and/or surveyed (ask permission to refer to them by name or just create pseudonyms), and of course the textual sources from the group you studied and the articles you've read.

Remember that you are not just reporting information but creating new meaning by adding to the academic conversation on discourse communities and literacy.

Revising:

Revision means "to see again," so as you work your way through your drafts think of how you might improve the content, development, organization, and style – the big things, saving the smaller things for later.

Proofreading and Editing:

This is the time to focus on smaller issues like grammar, sentence structure, mechanics, and making sure you've correctly used MLA format, including for in-text citations and the Works Cited page.