The Genre of Argument

Irene L. Clark

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Irene L. Clark
University of Southern California

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PREFACE

I first became interested in applying genre analysis to argumentation when I was teaching at the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands, working with PhD candidates in geography who wished to write publishable articles in English. These students were all high achievers in their field; yet, most of them were unsuccessful at writing articles in English, not because of poor language skills, but because they were unfamiliar with the conventions, that is, the "genre" of scholarly articles in the social sciences. Like many native-English-speaking students, the Dutch students had not analyzed the role of purpose and audience in constructing an effective argument, nor did they understand what constituted convincing evidence. Most importantly, they were not aware of the necessity of approaching a topic in terms of a problem to be addressed. I taught in Utrecht on two occasions, in 1989 and 1993, and during the more recent period, I developed several class lessons based on John M. Swales' concept of genre analysis, as described in his book, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). Once the Dutch students understood that social science writing is a genre with an argumentative purpose achieved through particular features, their writing improved impressively, and it was at this point that I began to think about using this approach with composition students in the United States.

The Goal of This Book

The goal of this book is to help students understand the purpose and generic features of college argumentation. Chapter 1 focuses on the relationship of purpose to genre, emphasizing the relationship between purpose and other conceptual features. Chapter 2 discusses several strategies for exploring a topic and finding a thesis suitable for the genre of argument. Chapter 3 examines the crucial role of reason. Chapter 4 presents a three-pass approach to critical reading, emphasizing the importance of discerning a writer's credentials and agenda before accepting the premise of a text. Chapter 5 discusses the role of audience in argumentation and strategies for establishing credibility.

Chapter 6 presents various strategies of supporting a thesis characteristic of the genre of argument. Chapter 7 discusses methods of organizing and incorporating outside information in order to maximize the writer's credibility and avoid plagiarism. Chapter 8 examines the function of form and the role that nar-

ration and description play in advancing an argumentative claim. Chapter 9 discusses two critical strategies in argumentation, establishing causality and defining terms. Chapter 10 demonstrates suggestions for revision. The appendix presents both MLA and APA documentation systems and discusses possibilities for conducting research through the World Wide Web. The concepts discussed in each chapter are reinforced through exercises, writing assignments, group work, and readings. The book also includes several examples of actual student papers annotated to focus attention on their generic features.

The Features of Academic Argument

In *The Genre of Argument* academic argument is viewed as a *genre* with particular conceptual and stylistic features. The book's overall premise is that when students understand how genre is determined by purpose, they will gain insight into how purpose influences many other features of a successful argumentative text. These features include the representation of the writer within the text, the concept of audience, the choice of topic and issue, the approach taken to the topic, and the type of support and evidence presented, as well as formal conventions associated with academic argument. Deriving from recent discussions of genre theory, the book is based on the following concepts:

1. Academic argument is a definable genre with distinguishing characteristics that students can understand easily once they become aware of its context and purpose. Although each academic discipline may be defined in terms of particular approaches, devices, and patterns, "academic argument is more unified than the fragmentation of academic fields might imply" (Nelson, Megill, and McClosky 4).
2. The genre of academic argument can be defined not primarily in terms of form but rather in terms of rhetorical and social situations that invite written response. These situations construct the role of the writer and determine the writer's conception of audience.
3. An important characteristic of academic argument is the "problematizing" of a topic—that is, in developing a position or thesis for an argumentative writing assignment, the writer identifies a specific problem, assumption, idea, view, or situation that requires some form of reevaluation or reexamination that can be addressed in writing. Problematization thus constitutes an important heuristic for academic argument. (Barton)
4. Academic argument moves readers to consider what is being said, to think about the reasons and evidence presented, to acknowledge that the argument is compelling, and then to reevaluate and modify their point of view.
5. Writing a compelling argument supported by convincing evidence requires and develops the ability to critically evaluate published material and incorporate outside information into a text.

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The Reconceptualization of Genre: Background

Traditionally, the word "genre" has been associated with notions of form and classifications of text, in particular with describing the formal features of a literary work. In a pedagogical context, this way of looking at genre has frequently suggested an emphasis on form, and to a certain extent, on form for form's sake. The most problematic application of this view completely separates form from context: students have been encouraged to insert content into formulaic slots within a text without questioning the rationale for doing so. A notorious example of this approach is the paradigm of the five paragraph essay, which many students apply indiscriminately to any writing task, without questioning why there should be five rather than four or six paragraphs or examining the relationship of one paragraph to another.

During the past ten years or so, however, genre has been reconceptualized in terms of **function.** While recognizing that genres can be characterized by regularities in textual form and substance, current thinking about genre looks at these regularities as surface manifestations of a more fundamental kind of regularity. The work of Freedman and Swales, among others, recognizes that although genres can be characterized by regularities in textual form, such regularity represents "typical ways of engaging rhetorically with recurring situations" (Freedman and Medway 2), and that similarities in textual form and feature derive from an effective response to situations that "writers encounter repeatedly" (Devitt 576). Because genres arise when writers respond appropriately to recurring rhetorical situations, the new concept of genre perceives generic conventions as deriving from suitability and effectiveness, rather than from arbitrary conventions.

To a great extent, this reconceptualized idea of genre builds on other theories of writing that have had an impact on the teaching of writing, particularly those that emphasize the functionality of text and the role of context in determining text effectiveness. Genre theory is consistent with rhetorical approaches, which focus attention on context, audience, and occasion and view writing as a way of responding to a specific reader (or readers) within a specific context on a specific occasion (Freeman and Medway 5). Genre theory is also compatible with social constructionist theory, which recognizes that the act of composing draws on previous interactions with others, and with speech act theory, which emphasizes the function of language as a way of acting in the world and the importance of context in creating meaning.

In accord with this emphasis on context, John M. Swales defines the concept of genre primarily by its common communicative purposes. Swales maintains that these purposes and the role of the genre within its environment have generated specific textual features, and he advocates a genre-centered approach to teaching as a means of enabling students to understand why a particular genre has acquired characteristic features.

Pedagogical Implications of Genre

The pedagogical implications of this reconceptualization of genre have raised considerable controversy among those who believe that genre **cannot** be taught but rather must be absorbed through the discourse community, those who feel that genre **should not** be taught explicitly because it will result in the blind adherence to form that characterized the original concept of genre, and those, such as myself, who argue that helping students acquire genre knowledge does not mean teaching form and formula as ends in themselves, but rather that it helps students understand what motivates the production of discourse so that they can develop appropriate response strategies. This position maintains that being able to produce an example of a genre is a matter not just of generating a text that adheres to certain formal characteristics; rather, the overt consideration of genre is a means of enhancing understanding so that students can apply generic conventions in a multiplicity of contexts.

A genre approach to argumentation can have significant impact on students throughout their university careers because a great deal of the writing students are required to do at the university, the sort of writing that is frequently referred to as "academic discourse," is really a form of argumentation, whether or not it is specifically labeled as such. Most college writing assignments, from the first-year essay to the content-area research paper, are actually *arguments* in the sense that they require students to establish and support a clearly stated thesis or position relative to a substantive and often controversial topic, to problematize that topic in order to establish an argumentative context for that thesis, and to establish a credentialed persona through the use of citation and acknowledgment of a counter argument. However, this is the type of writing with which students often have the most difficulty, not only because they are unfamiliar with it as a genre, but also because the requirements of the assignment are often presented solely in terms of form rather than purpose. As a result, students confuse argumentation with exposition, and the papers they write then consist of a linear sequence of unprocessed material in the body of the essay, with evaluative comment (if it exists at all) postponed to the concluding paragraph.

In contrast to a number of argumentation textbooks currently on the market, which include large sets of topic-oriented readings, I wanted *The Genre of Argument* to be relatively short, enabling students to use it as a guide. Although the concept of the book is supported by a body of literature on the subject of genre, the premise of the book is actually quite simple. It explains the purpose behind college argumentation, shows students what an argumentative essay looks like and aims to accomplish, and then suggests strategies for helping students complete argument-based writing assignments. Once students understand these ideas, they will not only write more effectively in their composition classes but will also be able to apply this approach to academic argument to other writing tasks both within and beyond their university careers.

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Irene Clark
University of Southern California
(IClark@Mizar.usc.edu)

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