Academic Publishing 101: Basics of Academic Writing for Publication

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This paper examines the fundamental differences between school writing and scholarly writing. Despite their superficial similarities, the two genres serve different social functions and thus employ the same textual features differently. Through the lens of rhetorical genre studies (RGS), the article explores how genres mediate social actions and how understanding these actions can aid new scholars in transitioning from school writing to effective scholarly writing. The first part of the article introduces RGS, highlighting its focus on the pragmatic and social aspects of genres. The second part offers practical advice for new scholarly writers, emphasizing the shift from writer-centered to reader-centered writing, participation in scholarly conversations, and the importance of creating new knowledge. By understanding the social actions that scholarly writing performs, writers can make informed decisions about how to use textual conventions to serve their readers' needs.

Keywords: academic writing, research publications, rhetorical genre studies

School writing and scholarly writing look superficially similar. After all, school writing is supposed to be modeled after scholarly writing, and it is sold to students as a preparation for scholarly writing. Yet, underneath these superficial similarities, there are fundamental differences between the two genres as they perform different social actions, and the same textual features serve different functions. While the field of English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) has a number of theoretical approaches (see Flowerdew & Habibie, 2022), this difference may be best explained through a field called rhetorical genre studies (RGS). This is a slightly different genre theory than the English for Special Purposes (ESP) genre theory (Swales, 1990) with its signature textbook "Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills" (Swales & Feak, 2012), and RGS is perhaps lesser known among language teachers in Japan. Therefore, this article begins with a brief introduction to RGS to prepare the reader for the more substantial and practical second part, which focuses on advice for new scholarly writers.

Part I: Rhetorical Genre Studies

RGS is a rhetorical approach to understanding social practices, and it is often traced back to Miller's (1984) seminal essay "Genre as Social Action." This essay emphasized the pragmatic and social aspects of genres, and it explored a genre's capacity to mediate private intentions and social exigence (Bitzer, 1968). This view contrasts with other genre traditions, including the literary tradition (Fowler, 1979) and the ESP tradition (Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990), which emphasize the formal and linguistic aspects of genres (see Bawarshi & Reiff [2010] and Hyon [1996] for more detailed accounts of different approaches to genres). While RGS does not overlook these textual considerations, it defines a genre in terms of the recurrent social actions it enacts. The

textual features are secondary to and a consequence of enacting that recurrent social motive (Miller, 1984; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010).

In more practical terms, it is true that many recurring social actions are enacted through similar textual features; therefore, a focus on textual regularities can be used as a bootstrap for learning (and teaching) a genre. However, a superficial understanding of textual features does not constitute acquisition of a genre. This point can be illustrated through a juxtaposition of two scholarly articles with vastly different writing styles.

The first excerpt comes from a research article in *TESOL Quarterly* by Riemenschneider et al. (2024), and its textual features typify the conventions of "scholarly writing."

> The construct of linguistic complexity is commonly used to describe language in educational contexts. SLA research defines it as "the extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied" (Ellis, 2003, p. 304). Complexity has been used together with accuracy and fluency (=CAF triad) to characterize second language performance (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). (p. 777)

The second excerpt also comes from a respectable journal in sociology *Social Problems*. This article, by Bruno Latour pretending to be Jim Johnson from the non-existent Walla Walla University, appears to break many textual prescriptions of the scholarly writing style (Johnson [Latour], 1988).

> But anyway, who are you, you the sociologists, to decide forever the real and final shape of humans, to trace with confidence the boundary between what is a "real" delegation and what is a "mere" projection, to sort out forever and without due inquiry the three different kinds of anthropomorphism I listed above? Are we not shaped by nonhuman grooms, although, I admit, only a very little bit? Are they not our brethren? Do they not deserve consideration? With your self-serving and self-righteous social problems, you always plead against machines and for deskilled workers; are you aware of your discriminatory biases? You discriminate between the human and the inhuman. I do not hold this bias but see only actors—some human, some nonhuman, some skilled, some unskilled—that exchange their properties. (p. 303)

Despite all these unusual textual features (e.g. "I," "you," colloquialism, direct questions, rhetorical questions, and even direct accusations), Johnson's/Latour's article performs the same social action of advancing a disciplinary conversation. What makes them a research publication genre is not how they look but what they do. Conversely, a text with the same textual features may not perform the same social action, as is the case with a very well-written student essay if it does not contribute to disciplinary knowledge building. In short, the RGS goes beyond the what of academic writing and addresses the why: Why do people read and write research articles in the first place? The answers to this basic question lead not only to some practical advice on how to write scholarly articles for publication but also why they should be written that way. This understanding of "why" allows new scholarly writers to exercise judgment on when to follow the prescriptive textual norms and when to deviate from them.

Part II: Practical Advice

The above RGS framework allows us to see the basic differences between school writing and scholarly writing in terms of social motives and actions. This discussion is followed by advice on how to make a successful transition from school writing to scholarly writing given these differences.

Basic Differences Between School Writing and Scholarly Writing

School writing and scholarly writing serve different social actions. As noted in Dias et al. (2013), school writing is first and foremost about student learning, even though this motive is complicated by the

teacher's and the institution's need to rank students by grading. For most typical school writing, the reader is the instructor, who is often more knowledgeable than the student on the given topic, and yet obligated to read the text in its entirety. Both the instructor and the student recognize the real motive of the writing assignment as a form of practice to try out and demonstrate knowledge and competence. That is why students often write about what instructors already know, and the instructors are rarely persuaded by student essays to change their opinions. Instead, the instructors typically focus on giving corrective feedback rather than engaging in authentic scholarly debates.

By comparison, we, scholars, have no obligation to read any articles that may come our way. In fact, the vast majority of articles do not get read (Burbules, 2020), and even when we do read them, we seldom read them in their entirety, and not in the order of the beginning to the end (Bazerman, 1988). We often have our own agendas, such as finding specific information for identifying knowledge gaps, designing our studies, and preparing teaching materials, among others.

These basic differences, summarized in Table 1, have implications for making a successful transition from school writing to scholarly writing.

Transition from School Writing to Scholarly Writing

Given these differences described in the previous section, a new scholarly writer must make a significant shift in purpose, audience, and approach. This transition can take place in graduate school since some graduate work straddles between the two genres. Yet, even a doctoral dissertation still contains elements of school writing.

From Writer-centered Writing to Reader-centered Writing

Despite what we teach about the importance of audience, school writing is ultimately about the writer's learning and growth. Good students have inferred this social motive and learned to show off their erudition in their writing.

However, scholarly writing is no longer about the writers: it is not about how smart the writers are, not about how well they can write, and not even about how much they need to publish. Scholarly writing is about serving other scholars' needs, and having this mindset is the most important.

Table 1
Basic Differences Between School Writing and Scholarly Writing

	School Writing	Scholarly Writing
Audience	• Instructor	• Other Scholars
Reader's obligation	• Obligated to read in its entirety	• None
Reader's motive	• To support student learning • To evaluate their knowledge/performance	• To obtain relevant information for own purposes
Writer's concerns	• Practice • Demonstrating knowledge	• Sharing of knowledge • Contributing to the field
Genre characteristics	• Specification of the shared knowledge • Demonstration of skills for the sake of performance	• Emphasis on the news value and advancing scholarly conversations • No irrelevant materials

From an Observer to a Participant of a Scholarly Conversation

In order to address other people's needs, one must listen first. In this sense, scholarly writing is no different from any other communication. Just as much as it is inappropriate for a newcomer at a party to barge into a group conversation and start talking, it is inappropriate to send out manuscripts without understanding the current conversation in the field (see Burke [1941] for his metaphor of written academic exchanges as a parlor conversation). In this

case, "listening" typically takes the form of reading other research articles and understanding the current state of knowledge in the field. This knowledge state is constantly changing, and it takes an expert to stay current and make a timely contribution.

Another form of listening is literal listening at conferences. Publication always lags behind the latest developments, and attending conferences is a good way to learn other people's latest research and their current concerns.

From Being Irrelevant to Being Useful

To be useful for other scholars, one must identify the knowledge gap in the current scholarly conversation. What is something they do not know but wish they knew? This knowledge gap is often found near the end of a research article, typically in the Discussion, Limitations, or Conclusion section. At conferences, people also discuss knowledge gaps in casual conversations, and one could pose direct questions, asking people to identify knowledge gaps.

From Synthesizing Existing Knowledge to Creating New Knowledge

Once a knowledge gap is identified, one can conduct a study to fill this gap. This "filling the gap" can be and often is building on existing research. Identifying a knowledge gap and filling it is the raison d'être of scholarly writing, and the creation of new knowledge is what distinguishes scholarly writing from school writing. For this reason, it is essential to have newsworthy content for other scholars (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 2016); for without it, no amount of "good writing" would result in a meaningful contribution. Given this function of scholarly writing, scholarly writers need to be clear about the news value: how their contributions fill particular knowledge gaps, and how this new knowledge advances the scholarly conversations in the field.

The remaining sections of this article address how these differences change the meaning of some of the same textual features in school writing and scholarly writing.

Textual Features

Because of all the differences in genre characteristics between school writing and scholarly writing, the same textual features often serve different functions. This section highlights some of the textual features that occur in both genres but serve different functions. Scholarly writers should be aware of these differences so that they can use them meaningfully to serve their purposes and not trigger unintended functions by blindly following the conventions.

Organization and Formatting

Perhaps the most obvious similarity between school writing and scholarly writing is their appearance. After all, writing assignments in disciplines are often modeled after scholarly genres (Clark & Russell, 2014), and students are often asked to conform to the disciplinary organizations and formats, such as IMRAD and APA in certain disciplines. Yet, students are seldom taught why these conventions exist, and they typically see these requirements as arbitrary.

However, these conventions are a result of what disciplinary writers have worked out over time, and they serve meaningful functions (Bazerman, 1988). The conventions emphasize what is considered important in the discipline, and its predictability allows the reader to skim and scan for information. The differences among various conventions also betray their ideological differences. This point may be illustrated by discussing APA and MLA, perhaps the two most familiar styles for the readers of this journal.

The APA style came out of behaviorism in psychology, and it embodies the values of empiricism and positivism (Bazerman, 1988; Hagge, 1994). The style

privileges recent journal articles as the most preferred source, and its foregrounding of the date of publication implies that knowledge changes quickly and sources become quickly outdated. In other words, the style is meant to allow the reader to quickly determine the relevance of a particular source. This style is not meant for a field where old knowledge persists, and it was not designed to cite sources such as *Meno* (Plato, ca 385 B.C.E./2012).

The MLA style, on the other hand, evolved out of the interest of humanities scholars to perform close textual analyses, create a level playing field, and prevent plagiarism (Smith, 2007). Its preferred source is a book-length work, and it is less concerned with the age of the work. In the MLA style, both ancient and contemporary authors (Plato; Bazerman) could discuss the nature of knowledge without giving away their ages.

In language studies, the decision to adopt the APA or MLA style is often telling of the positionality of a journal or a field. Those that adopt the APA style aspire to wield scientific authority, while those that adopt the MLA style claim their roots in humanities. It is true that the organization and formatting are typically imposed by journals, and individual authors have little choice in that matter. Nevertheless, beginning writers can exercise rhetorical choices within the confines of the prescribed style, knowing the meaning of these conventions.

Jargon

Jargon is another conspicuous aspect of academic writing, and detractors like to point out examples like this notoriously impenetrable passage from Butler (1997):

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (p. 12)

Faced with these and other—less extreme—examples, students correctly observe that academic writing is jargon-laden, and they often make conscious efforts to insert disciplinary jargon in their writing. This rhetorical choice is not unreasonable since school writing is sometimes partly evaluated in terms of students' abilities to use disciplinary jargon precisely. However, it becomes a problem when students internalize this model and start seizing every opportunity to use jargon to demonstrate their arcane knowledge. As described earlier, scholarly writing is not about the ostensible display of one's erudition. By the time the article has been peer-reviewed and published, the writer's competence in the field is not in question. Disciplinary jargon exists because experts in a given field found ordinary language inadequate for discussing their technical matters, so they had to invent new words to refer to objects and ideas that do not come up in ordinary conversations. Take the following passage from a recent *TESOL Quarterly* article by Strong and Leeming (2024):

> To prevent a learning effect by administering a pretest of the phrasal verbs, a separate group of L2 learners in the same university but with a higher level of proficiency and in their third year of English study took part in norming the phrasal verbs. (p. 733)

Readers of this journal probably had no difficulty in understanding the above passage. Yet, those who do not have training in TESOL may find it difficult to understand the precise meaning of expressions, such as "learning effect," "pretest," "phrasal verbs," "L2," and "norming." It is possible to

rephrase all these words, but the resulting passage would be longer and less precise. Even with the earlier Butler example, the question is whether the readers of *Diacritics* were able to understand her prose; disciplinary outsiders are not in the position to evaluate the readability or appropriateness of Butler's rhetorical choice. To put it simply, disciplinary jargon allows the writer and the reader to communicate precisely and concisely. When jargon serves this purpose, the writer should not hesitate to use it. However, when a particular terminology is not readily understood by the reader of a specific journal, and its use is more likely to obfuscate than clarify, then its use becomes counterproductive; a less technical term would better serve the cause of clear communication and advancing a disciplinary conversation.

Boosters and Hedges

Boosters and hedges are used in ordinary language to express one's personal confidence. In North America, high school students in English classes are often encouraged to project confidence in their writing and avoid hedges.

However, boosters and hedges are delicate matters in scholarly writing as they relate to knowledge claims. They affect the content's accuracy and truthfulness, as well as the writer's credibility. Take a sentence from Jacobson (2024), who conducted a discourse analysis of one first-generation Latino first-year university student in Texas with the pseudonym "Jain." The following is the first sentence in his "Discussion and Implications" section:

> Jain's stance-making choices appeared to reflect attention to shifts in genre and disciplinary context, offering evidence of the importance of available writing opportunities that complement developmental rationales often associated with stance-related research (Aull, 2018; Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Gere, 2018; Lancaster, 2014). (pp. 309-310)

Jacobson could have claimed more by removing the hedge "appeared to," substituting "offering evidence of" with "demonstrating," and perhaps adding "for all first-year students" to increase the level of certainty and generalizability. However, Jacobson could not have ascertained what was truly happening in Jain's head from a discourse analysis, and it would have been difficult to justify a universal claim from the sample size of one. On the other hand, the most conservative claim would have been to say that this was what Jain wrote without claiming anything about its truthfulness or relevance to anyone else. Then his study would have had a very limited value. The hedges allowed Jacobson to suggest accuracy of his interpretation and its broader applicability; then his suggestion was made stronger by references to other studies with larger sample sizes with similar results.

There is no formula for deciding how much claim the writer should make. Sample size, study duration, study design, etc., all influence the basic level. Then factors outside of one's study also play a role, such as theoretical robustness, the nature of the claim, and the existence of confirming or contradicting studies among others. Deciding on the right level of knowledge claim requires expert judgment, and it is a work of art.

Citation

Citation is most commonly taught to students as necessary evidence for supporting their claims. However, citation in scholarly writing has many other functions, such as reporting the current state of knowledge, creating a knowledge gap, establishing the field, staking a position in the field, affirming membership, and building cultural capital (Giltrow, et al., 2021; Hyland, 2000).

Perhaps the most important use of citation in a research article is to indicate the current knowledge status and create a knowledge gap. This function is exemplified

in the following excerpt by Riemenschneider et al. (2024):

> In research on writing quality assessment, which studies how linguistic text characteristics relate to text quality, discoursive measures of text cohesion typically are added to the domains of syntax and lexis (cf., e.g., Crossley, 2020; McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy, 2010). Other potentially relevant domains have largely been ignored, such as the morphological complexity of a text, which has been identified as an essential characteristic in the display of language proficiency, especially in morphologically rich languages (Brezina & Pallotti, 2019; Hancke, Vajjala, & Meurers, 2012). (p. 778)

The first set of citations describes the current knowledge status in writing quality assessment to focus on syntax, lexical choice, and cohesion markers. The second set of citations creates a knowledge gap by indicating another feature (i.e., morphological complexity) that could be used but not currently used. As I described earlier, this move allows Riemenschneider et al. to bring value to the field by offering to fill this gap with their study.

Some other major functions of citation include establishing the field and indicating one's theoretical orientation and position. The following two excerpts illustrate how two writers take different positions on the seemingly same topic, first by Bawarshi (2016):

> Rhetorical genre studies, since the groundbreaking work of Campbell and Jamieson (1978), Miller (1984), Devitt (1993), and Bazerman (1994), has identified genres as socially derived, intersubjective, rhetorical typifications that help us recognize and act within recurrent situations. (p. 243)

Then by Cheng (2007):

> Genre is often defined as "a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written" (Swales, 1990, p. 33) that serves as "responses by speakers or writers to the demands of a social context" (Johns, 2002, p. 3). In recent years, genre has become "one of the most important and influential concepts in language education" (Hyland, 2004, p. 5). (p. 288)

They both seem to discuss genres; however, the citations tell us that they are discussing two entirely different topics and participating in two distinct scholarly conversations. Disciplinary insiders readily recognize Jamieson, Miller, Devitt, and Bazerman as belonging to RGS: these names invoke a certain set of other scholars, and Bawarshi's argument is made meaningful in the context of the RGS epistemic network. On the other hand, Swales, Johns, and Hyland belong to the ESP genre tradition: these names invoke a different set of scholars, and Cheng's argument is made meaningful in the context of the ESP genre epistemic network. The implied epistemic networks are invisible to disciplinary outsiders, but they can be made visible with a tool called ResearchRabbit (Chandra et al., n.d.), which generates a network of research articles based on citation patterns (Figure 1 and 2).

By invoking certain scholars (and not others), writers establish different fields, position themselves within these fields, and claim particular epistemic spaces in the disciplinary maps.

Figure 1
Citation Map of Bawarshi (2016)

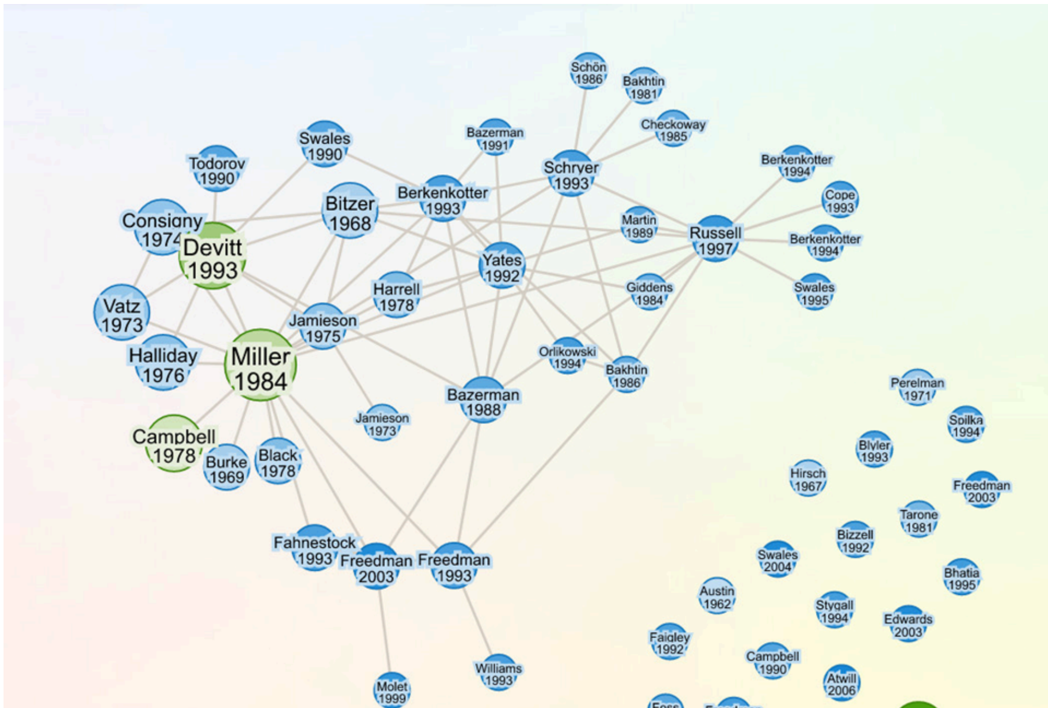
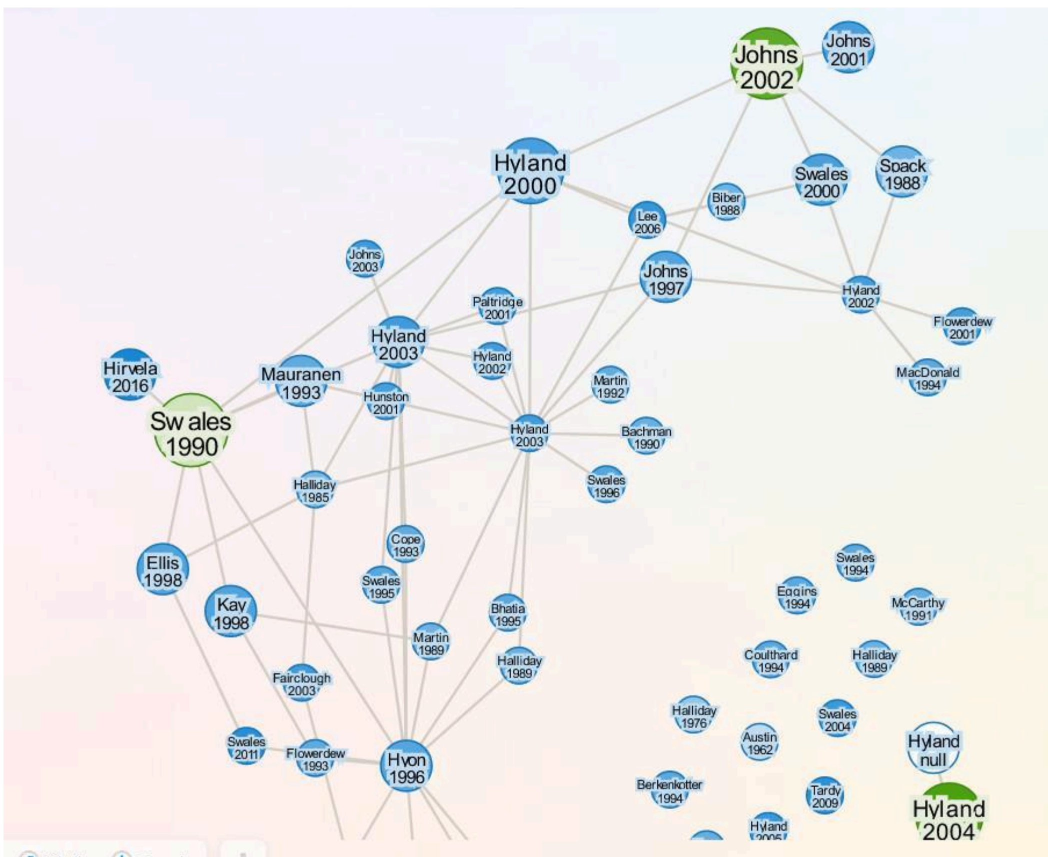


Figure 2
Citation Map of Cheng (2007)



Beyond this epistemic positioning, citation can also signal the writer's professional and personal connections and alliances. Such a move can be observed in the first two sentences from Artemeva (2008), which was published in a major American journal.

> In the past 25 years or so, scholars have conducted considerable research on genre teaching and learning in academic, workplace, and transitional contexts (e.g., Artemeva, 2005; Artemeva, Logie, & St. Martin, 1999; Bazerman & Russell, 2003; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Freedman, 1994; Freedman & Adam, 2000a; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994; Freedman & Medway, 1994a, 1994b; Johns et al., 2006; Spafford, Schryer, Mian, & Lingard, 2006). Among those, numerous studies (e.g., Artemeva & Freedman, 2006; Coe, Lingard, & Teslenko, 2002; Devitt, 2004; Dias & Paré, 2000; Schryer, 1993; Schryer & Spoel, 2005) were conducted within the theoretical framework of rhetorical genre studies (RGS), also known as North American, or new rhetorical, genre theory. (p.161)

An outsider may not recognize that the 16 out of 20 people mentioned in these sentences are Canadians, and all 20 of them (including the Americans) know each other from conferences and other professional events. Many of them have collaborated with each other, and some of them even work together.

This last point underscores the importance of attending conferences. They are not just for networking in the usual sense of the word: People also create spaces for themselves in relation to others in the epistemic map of the field, and this epistemic network can later become a network of citations in a manuscript.

Finally, citation is a cultural capital. Scholars' impacts are often measured by how often their articles are cited by others in journals of different rankings. While a scholar's worth cannot and should not be simplified into a single number, its appearance of objectivity has made it a popular assessment tool of scholarly productivity in recent years, and a scholar's citation index number has real consequences in decisions, such as hiring, promotion, and grant selections (see Haustein & Larivière, 2015 for an extended discussion). Because of these bibliometric incentives, there is a growing problem of citation cartels, which try to game the system by citing each other with little merit. It is natural to cite people who work together in the same field because they share the same research concerns and they are familiar with each other's work; however, we should be aware of the political and ethical dimensions of our citation decisions, and we should cite responsibly.

Table 2
Different Functions of the Same Textual Features Between School Writing and Scholarly Writing

	School Writing	Scholarly Writing
Organization and formatting	• To make the professor happy by following his/her arbitrary requirement	• To help the reader find the information they need (without having to read the entire article)
Jargon	• To demonstrate learning	• To be precise and concise
Boosters and Hedges	• To express personal confidence	• To manage knowledge status and knowledge claims
Citation	• To support claims	• To manage knowledge status • To signal shared membership • To declare theoretical allegiance • To build cultural capital

All the different functions of the same textual features are summarized in Table 2.

Conclusion

While school writing and scholarly writing may appear similar on the surface,

their underlying purposes and functions reveal significant differences. School writing is primarily a pedagogical tool designed to cultivate and assess student learning, where the audience is often a more knowledgeable instructor who is obligated to read and evaluate the student's work. Scholarly writing, on the other hand, serves the purpose of contributing to a broader academic conversation, where the writer's main goal is to share new knowledge and insights with fellow scholars. The audience for scholarly writing is not obligated to read the work at all, so the text must be compelling and relevant to their needs.

The transition from school writing to scholarly writing involves a shift in focus from the writer's learning to the needs of the academic community. This shift requires an understanding of the social actions that scholarly writing performs and the role of textual features in achieving these actions. By adopting the mindset of a participant in a scholarly conversation, new academic writers can make meaningful contributions to their fields.

The present discussion on school writing and scholarly writing also highlights the usefulness of RGS. The specifics of the rhetorical demands may be different in different cultural and linguistic traditions, but RGS's focus on the social and pragmatic aspects of genres helps the writer to adapt to the changing manifestations of the recurring motives. Ultimately, successful scholarly writing is not just about following prescriptive norms but about making informed rhetorical choices that advance the field and contribute to ongoing academic dialogues. An appendix is available for readers who would like to explore further.

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Appendix

Practical Handbooks/Textbooks: For readers who just want one handbook to help them start their first academic writing for scholarly publications, I recommend Swales and Feak (2012). For a textbook based on RGS, I recommend Giltrow et al. (2021).

English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP): For readers who would like an introduction to the field of ERPP, I recommend Flowerdew & Habibie (2021).

Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS): For a good introduction on RGS, I recommend Bawarshi & Reiff (2010). A collection of landmark essays in RGS can be found in Miller & Devitt (2019).

Different Theories of Genre: For understanding competing approaches to genre, I recommend Hyon's (1996) classic article, as well as a book-length treatment by Bawarshi & Reiff (2010).

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