Occluded Genres:
Rethinking Student Writing in Higher Education

How would you define what an essay is? Do disciplinary essays share sufficient characteristics to warrant the common name for this type of assessed writing? How would you define the writing style and standard expected of students producing a report for laboratory work or projects in the Physical Sciences or Mathematics? What are we asking of students when we require them to write for a “non-academic” audience? How would you describe “good” writing in your discipline?

There have been repeated alarmist cries of a decline in writing standards across all educational levels in recent decades. At the same time, there has been a rise in writing support services in Universities, which have until recently operated on a remedial support model aimed at struggling students. Operators of these writing services frequently note, however, that it is not the struggling students but the ambitious and able ones who are most likely to come to them for support. Recent trends in research on student writing in Higher Education have consequently begun to acknowledge a more complex landscape to the challenges all students face with their writing; proposing that the issue is not necessarily a decline of standards so much as a case of students being confronted with a “hidden curriculum” of implicit writing norms, styles and standards that are never clearly articulated. Furthermore, rather than assuming some objective, universal standard of good writing, they argue that we need to recognise that disciplinary writing and thinking are wholly intertwined. We are not just introducing our students to disciplinary knowledge, we are also inculcating them into disciplinary languages and modes of expression. The research also challenges the common belief, particularly in textbooks, that the quality and standard of students’ writing matters only to Arts and Humanities disciplines that commonly assess through essays. Indeed, as the chapter for this week notes, Engineering students can be required to produce up to fifteen different “genres” of writing across their degree programme.

Nesi and Gardner’s research on student writing “genres” has emerged from their work with The British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE), which is a repository of almost 3,000 written assignments from across the disciplines and from four levels of study (first year undergraduate to Masters). These assignments were collected from a number of UK Universities between 2004 and 2007. All of them are genuine assessments that had been awarded a grade of 60 or above (2:1/1st or Merit/Distinction). Where Nesi and Gardner’s work differs from other research on student writing is in their analysis of actual student work in order to define and interrogate commonly used terms in the UK for genre forms (essay, case study, research report, lab report, etc). Previous studies on student writing have depended on surveys and data analyses of forms of assessment, and had thus never questioned the use of, and assumptions underpinning, these genre terms.

- Prior to reading this chapter, did you have a clear sense in your mind of the norms and conventions for student writing in your discipline? Do you feel there is a consensus on what these are amongst your colleagues?
- Do you find any of Nesi and Gardner’s genre categories surprising, particularly in terms of how they cross disciplinary boundaries (e.g. “Empathy Writing” emerging as a genre category in Mathematics, or “challenge” essays being a rare occurrence in most Arts and Humanities disciplines)?
- Which of Nesi and Gardner’s writing genres are required of assessments in any of the modules or programmes you teach on? Are some genres more common than others in your discipline? Have any of them been recently introduced, and if so, to what purpose?
- On the basis of this chapter, why might students struggle with understanding what writing standard is expected of them?
• What impact might Nesi and Gardner’s potentially more accurate set of definitions of student writing genres have on the design of assessment, the curriculum overall and/or support for student writing (including embedding writing skills into the curriculum)?

**Reading**


The chapter is available in [Paperpile](#)