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As my summary in the [November 16th Bulletin](http://www.tcnj.edu/~writing/faculty/bulletinarchive/index.html) of Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki’s work on academic writing illustrates, there can sometimes be a “misperception of uniformity” (60) in standards for “good writing” among faculty across the university – a misperception that ultimately inhibits students’ growth as academic writers. Before outlining some of Thaiss and Zawacki’s recommendations for addressing this, it’s important to review their conclusions about what we can, in fact, assume about “academic writing” regardless of discipline.[[1]](#footnote-2) Academic writing, they contend, has three traits:

1. “Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.” As Thaiss and Zawacki explain, “academics are invariably harsh toward any student or scholar who hasn’t done the background reading, who isn’t prepared to talk formally or off the cuff about the subject of the writing, and whose writing doesn’t show careful attention to the objects of study and reflective thought about them” (5). They recognize, of course, that we have very different standards for colleagues and students, but emphasize the core requirement of disciplined, careful reading and thinking.
2. “The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.” Here Thaiss and Zawacki make clear that dominance does not mean the absence of the senses or emotion. However, while empirical observations are central to many disciplines, what makes writing about these things academic is their careful, fair, and reasoned analysis.
3. “An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.” We assume that our readers may object or disagree and our goal therefore is to anticipate and address these potential objections, and “inspire the intelligent reader’s respect for [our] analytical ability” (7).

These three traits seem clear and uncontestable, yet the authors point out that they do not result in an easily identifiable list of prescriptive directions or guidelines. Their study therefore sought to better understand how writers (professors and students) gained a more complex understanding and internalization of the requirements and standards of writing in their discipline.

While academics will often push boundaries and explore alternative formats, methodologies, voices, styles, and so on, they are, nevertheless, still “writing for other academics, in an academic forum, and if they are being published and read, are no doubt displaying the features” above (8). They are also writing within the expectations of their particular discipline and sub-discipline. When students write in “alternative” formats, however, they are not necessarily producing acceptable academic writing; moreover, they often don’t realize why their text doesn’t meet academic standards. Since students will always encounter variations from discipline to discipline, course to course, teacher to teacher, Thaiss and Zawacki describe **helpful practices for enabling students to see that variation not as idiosyncrasy, but as differences between various discourse communities**. Here are a few of their recommendations:

* “Define expectations clearly and place them in the context of the discipline or in other contexts meaningful to you” (142). Being explicit with students about expectations for written work means more than using clear terminology, since those terms might have very different meanings in different disciplines (e.g., “research”). It also means more than providing personal justifications for the standards (“This is what I want” or “This is what’s expected here in my class”). Rather, Thaiss and Zawacki recommend that faculty analyze how their own procedures and criteria have evolved, and then show students that standards are a “deliberate blending of influences and demands from the academy, the discipline, the area of interest, and the local/institutional communities” (146).
* “Provide students with contextualized feedback on their writing, especially early in a course” (147). As Thaiss and Zawacki found in the surveys, focus groups, and reflective essays (from proficiency exams at George Mason), students “credited their understanding of the rhetorics of their fields to teachers who took the time to respond in detail to their writing.” The authors likewise point out that the more sharing and discussion that occurs among colleagues to discuss their expectations, the better faculty can translate the expectations into useful, contextualized feedback for students.
* “Help students find their own ‘passions’ in learning and to realize their passions in your discipline. Seek ways to validate the student as ‘expert’ – as potential contributor to the field” (150). Another of their main findings in talking with students is that “third stage” student writers had a conscious sense of how their confidence grew: they “frequently credited teachers for helping them understand what it means to be original and how to make rhetorical choices that reflect their own interests and ideas and not simply what they think their teacher wants” (150). Specifically, Thaiss and Zawacki emphasize helping students see a discipline “not only as a system of terms, texts, expectations, and procedures, but also a dynamic realm that can accommodate and nurture different personalities, passions, and visions” (150). The word “passion” comes up frequently in this section of the chapter, and one point I especially liked was that third stage student writers “understood that academic writing doesn’t rule out passion, but rather gives it a disciplined voice” (150). In line with this, Thaiss and Zawacki recommend that faculty talk with students about their own professional career trajectory and interests, as well as share their scholarship. More concretely, they outline the following activity: “In the first week of the semester teachers might invite students to write about the course objectives, the knowledges they already have related to those objectives, and, perhaps most importantly, what their own goals are for learning and writing about the course material” (151).

Thaiss and Zawacki conclude *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines* with some excellent ideas for increasing faculty conversations about disciplinary writing through faculty and program development workshops. Using their ideas as models, I will offer several new opportunities in the spring, and in the final fall Bulletin next week, I will provide a schedule with online registration.

1. The definition of “academic writing” continues to be surprisingly controversial. The most engaging article I’ve read recently on the topic is “A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing” by Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer, both from Northern Illinois University. If anyone would like a pdf, please email me off list at goldschm@tcnj.edu. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)