

Cultivating the Disciplinary Eye/I

Debie Lohe

The Context:

- General Education writing-intensive course requirement for juniors/seniors, meant to:
 - Build on first-year writing course (required for all undergraduates)
 - Cultivate an awareness of the disciplinary conventions of writing in the major
- Departments often couldn't sustain the number of classes required, particularly in heavy-major disciplines
- English offered several writing-intensive courses

The Course:

- A 300-level composition course, focused on:
 - Demystifying the relationship between form and content
 - Sharpening students' awareness of choices and effects
 - Creating multiple versions of written work, with attention to readerly expectations
- Strong emphases on:
 - Cultivating meta-cognitive awareness in writing
 - Analyzing specific disciplinary conventions
 - Developing an authentic written voice that *suits the expectations of the disciplinary audience*

The Assignment: Final Project of the Semester

Part I: Write a short, 5-page essay in the style of your discipline, drawing on 3 scholarly sources from your field. This essay should meet the expectations of your discipline in both content and form; it should have an argument of its own and present evidence and document sources according to the conventions of your discipline. The imagined audience for this piece should be scholars in your field of study.

Part II: Using the **same topic, sources, and argument** from Part I, write a short, 5-page essay on the same topic in a style that seems more in keeping with your personal voice. The imagined audience for this piece should be broader than your disciplinary audience, though possibly as educated.

Part III: Drawing on the earlier work, create a longer essay (minimum of 8 pages). In doing this, you will need to find a way to blend the styles of the two pieces, creating a sort of hybrid text, in a form that suits your subject matter and writing priorities. The imagined audience for this piece should be an audience made up of both scholars in your discipline and academics from other disciplines who might find the subject of interest. Think of this piece as the foundation for a public performance of your work – perhaps as a lecture at a university or conference, etc.

Meta-Commentary: Identify between 8-10 *specific* choices you've made and explain the effects you were aiming for. In particular, you should focus on the kinds of choices that you made regarding form and presentation and the ways in which disciplinary conventions informed these choices.

What's a Meta-Commentary, and What Should It Look Like?

Overview

With each essay assignment you hand in, you'll produce a Meta-Commentary to accompany it. Meta-Commentary is just a way of identifying choices you've made as a writer and commenting on them. It allows you an opportunity to consider the relationship between *what* you wrote and *how* you wrote it, the effects you were going for, what new stylistic devices you were experimenting with, etc. (E.g., for a given assignment, you might choose to identify particular figures of speech you used, or to explain why you structured some part of the essay the way you did, or to articulate a struggle with choosing the right word/phrasing for something.) The overall goal is to select **specific choices** you made and to comment on why you made them.

Each essay assignment will ask you to focus one or two particular kinds of choices, but you're also free to comment on a range of other things as well. The Meta-Commentary should be included with both draft essays and revised essays: in drafts, it provides you a chance to ask questions of your peer reader, and in revised essays, it allows you to talk about specific changes you made in revision, perhaps even with your peer reviewer's comments in mind. Meta-Commentaries will be assessed for their specificity, thoroughness, and attention to textual subtleties; their quality will impact the final grade on the essay they accompany.

[Note: I provide additional information about how the grading will affect the essay grade in class, as well as what "specificity, thoroughness, and attention to textual subtleties" look like.]

Form

Meta-Commentary can take one of several forms. You might choose one form and stick with it for every paper, or you might change it up somewhat over the course of the semester. In general, Meta-Commentary should make **visible** the fact that you're commenting on your own writing choices. To include Meta-Commentary in your essays, you could do any of the following:

- Use footnotes or endnotes to comment on specific choices you made as a writer.
- Use Microsoft Comment (or something like it) to insert comments about particular choices.
- Find some way of visually splitting the page (perhaps horizontally), so that the body of your paper is on one side and your comments are on the other. (Or hand in the essays in a folder which shows this same relationship.)
- Use different colored highlighters – using either electronic or pen highlighters – and type up comments that correspond to the different colors.
- Devise some other way of providing commentary on the paper you've written.