

Wilder, Laura. *Rhetorical Strategies and Genre Conventions in Literary Studies: Teaching and Writing in the Disciplines.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012. 238 pages. \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-8093-3093-5.

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Imagine if a discourse analyst were to examine a representative sample of scholarship in a particular field, uncovering a set of valued and stable (though tacit and unspoken) conventions that shape the ways scholars in that field write—conventions that usually remain implicit in classroom contexts. What would happen if undergraduate students were taught these conventions explicitly? What would be the advantages and disadvantages for students' learning? For the instructors teaching the course?

Such are the driving questions behind Laura Wilder's *Rhetorical Strategies and Genre Conventions in Literary Studies: Teaching and Writing in the Disciplines*. Wilder examines the special *topoi*, or set of argumentative commonplaces, used in a sample of scholarship in literary criticism (28 recently published articles from 12 prominent literature journals). She then examines the results of an experimental curriculum in an undergraduate writing about literature (WAL) program in which the special *topoi* are taught explicitly as heuristics for students' reading of literary criticism and their writing of interpretative/analytic essays. Drawing on text analysis of expert and student writing, interviews with students and faculty, and ethnographic observation of classroom instruction, Wilder explores such questions as the following: How does use of the special *topoi* in students' writing shape the ways the instructors read and evaluate students' essays? How do the performances of students who participated in the special-*topoi* curriculum compare with those of students in the control groups in which the *topoi* remained part of the, as Wilder puts it, "implicit rhetorical curriculum"? How do students and faculty evaluate the explicit genre-based approach to WAL instruction?

In taking up these questions, Wilder frames her book as filling a gap in writing in the disciplines (WID) research. Compared to previous WID research on disciplines outside English—for example, Fahnestock on science, Geisler on philosophy, or MacDonald on psychology and history (just to name three)—fewer scholars have examined the discourse of literary studies. One reason for this, as Wilder suggests in the introductory chapter, is that the field is so close to home for composition/rhetoric scholars, many of whom earned their doctorates in English and may feel too inside the discourse to identify rhetorical patterns objectively. Indeed, Wilder makes the point that the few WID studies that have examined literary studies (e.g., Bazerman; Fahnestock and Secor) have “tended to treat this discourse primarily as a foil for illuminating the contrasting rhetorical character of scientific discourse” (2).

In addition to this familiarity problem, Wilder offers two related reasons that literature scholarship presents a complex case for WID research. One is that many (and perhaps especially) literature professors would challenge the notion that their undergraduate courses are aimed at disciplinary enculturation; many believe instead that their courses are aimed at general thinking and writing skills that students can transfer to any context. Wilder explores how literature faculty often underestimate or are unaware of the degree to which disciplinary rhetorical practices and values tacitly inform their scholarship and teaching (65). This leads to the second reason that literature scholarship presents a complex case for WID research: Many literature professors also challenge the notion that there exist underlying, discourse community-derived rhetorical conventions that they could teach their students even if they wanted to. According to this view, the field comprises many heterogeneous discourses that defy typification. These two beliefs can work as obstacles, then, for writing researchers, especially those housed in English departments who seek to improve the teaching and learning of writing in their home departments.

Rhetorical Strategies and Genre Conventions in Literary Studies will be of interest to a wide range of readers. The primary audience is composition/rhetoric scholars who work in WAC/WID contexts, many of whom will be familiar with Wilder's earlier published pieces of this research (see, e.g., "Revisited" and Wilder and Wolfe). Secondary audiences include college writing instructors, as well as instructors of undergraduate (and possibly graduate) literature courses. Importantly, this book will also interest genre-focused scholars working inside and outside the United States in the areas of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) / English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (e.g., Cheng; Swales) and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (e.g., Christie and Derewianka; Martin and Rose; Schleppegrell). As a reader familiar with these various strands of genre studies and who uses linguistic methods in my own work, I was intrigued by the various points of overlap between this book's arguments for an explicit genre-based approach and pedagogical approaches in more linguistic traditions of genre studies. (I comment further on these below.) Finally, the book will interest anyone in higher education who is concerned about the assessment of undergraduate writing, the uses of reflection and metacognition in learning, and questions related to researching and teaching for "transfer."

In brief form, the book comprises six chapters that, taken together, offer compelling evidence in support of explicitly teaching disciplinary discourse strategies in undergraduate literature courses. Chapter 1 offers an update of Jeanne Fahnenstock and Marie Secor's 1991 rhetorical analysis of literary criticism. Chapters 2 and 3 explore how special topoi in literary studies take shape in actual undergraduate classrooms, guiding the instructional approaches and grading of students' essays. Chapter 4 discusses results of an experimental study in which certain sections of a WAL course were taught the special topoi explicitly while others were not. Chapters 5 and 6 then draw on interviews to probe into the participating students' and professors' perceptions of the gains and drawbacks of the experimental approach. Throughout, Wilder uses rhetorical analysis of student

and expert texts, discourse-based interviews, ethnographic observation, and classroom intervention. What follows is a more detailed commentary on each chapter.

Chapter 1 asks whether the five special topoi identified by Fahnestock and Secor in 1991—which they named *appearance/reality*, *ubiquity*, *paradigm*, *paradox*, and *contemptus mundi*—still hold in more current scholarship. In examining a sample of recently published articles from 12 top literature journals, Wilder found that, (1) the topoi do hold (and are in fact so stable as to be described as “conventions”) and, (2) an additional three topoi appear to have gained traction since 1991, which Wilder names *social justice*, *mistaken-critic*, and *context*. The first of these is invoked as scholars connect their analyses and interpretations to issues of current social justice. The second, *mistaken-critic*, works as a variation on the appearance/reality topos—with the “mistaken” critical view mapping on to the “appearance” or surface-level reading of the text. The third new topos, *context*, functions to bring “historically contextual details . . . to bear upon textual interpretation” (44). Interestingly, in subsequent chapters (reviewed below) Wilder argues that *mistaken-critic* and *paradigm* may be the most valued topoi among scholars in the field but also the most challenging for students to use effectively in their writing, as their use requires engagement with and understanding of the critical landscape or of how theoretical lenses can be applied to analysis of literary texts. In contrast, the topoi that students perceived to be simplest or most “obvious,” and perhaps less tied to the unique character of literary studies, are *appearance/reality* (i.e., movement from surface-level to deep reading of meaning) and *ubiquity* (i.e., the pervasiveness of specific figures, symbols, and other textual phenomena). Wilder argues that, together, these eight topoi point to an overall value on complexity in literary analysis. That is to say, the underlying drive of literary criticism, itself a complex undertaking, is to unearth the complexity of the texts under analysis.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of how literature professors’ instructional practices may be driven by tacit, discipline-based

rhetorical expectations. Any writing scholar who has worked with faculty in WID workshop settings will be familiar with resistance to the notion that one's own writing practices or expectations for students are grounded in community-based regularities. The picture that emerges in this chapter is that this resistance may be especially entrenched in English departments. Wilder draws on interviews she conducted over several years with 13 literature professors from two different institutions, as well as her observation of one WAL course, to explore how faculty define their learning goals and expectations for students. Recalling the well-known "myth of transparency," whereby disciplinary insiders do not perceive the specialized nature of their own discourses (cf. Russell), Wilder found that her participants, in her words, "tend to universalize the rhetorical context of the writing they assign and produce" (63). She found that many are seemingly "unaware of the extent to which disciplinary rhetorical practices and values have come to tacitly permeate their discourse and expectations" (65).

The interviews and observations did reveal sharp divisions and conflicts among the participants. Divisions were revealed, for instance, in terms of how the professors viewed traditional notions of the canon or whether they aligned themselves with "postdisciplinary" or "predisciplinary" pedagogies. But the majority, no matter where they stood with regard to these debates, seemed to underestimate the degree to which their instructional practices were shaped by discipline-based rhetorical expectations. In particular, Wilder found that instructors who explained in interviews that their goal was to assist students to be good writers in general regularly invoked the special topoi when directing class discussion.

In Chapter 3, Wilder extends this point about the implicit rhetorical curriculum to professors' grading practices, examining the judgments of five literature professors who served as raters of the student essays that were analyzed for their use of topoi. In my view, this is the most powerful chapter in the book. Just as the entire book speaks to linguistics-oriented traditions of genre studies, this chapter speaks to the growing body of linguistic-based

research on *stance*, *voice*, and *discoursal identity* in student writing (see, e.g., Hyland and Sancho Guinda; Ivanič; Nelson and Castello). It resonates especially with research showing that student writing that projects “involvement” with or “assimilation” of the disciplinary discourse often receives higher grades or scores (Lancaster; North; Soliday).

Each of the five participants in Wilder’s study rated six students’ essays, some of which came from the experimental WAL sections. Importantly, the raters were not made aware of the purposes of the study and were not informed about the topoi. Results show that they preferred the essays that more frequently and effectively used the special topoi. Most significantly perhaps, Wilder found that all the raters had positive response to essays that used the *mistaken-critic* and *paradigm* topoi. Effective use of these strategies, she suggests, requires that students position themselves within a disciplinary landscape by showing critical awareness of others’ views and competence in applying or evaluating those views. These two topoi, when used effectively, also project the stance of an emerging disciplinary insider.

Wilder makes this last point by referring to the concept of *ethos*. She reasons that effective use of the special topoi works implicitly to project the *ethos* of “a potential colleague and more-than-provisional discourse community member” (102). It is here that Wilder’s work connects most directly with the above-cited research on *stance*, *voice*, and *discoursal identity*. In terms of pedagogical implications, Chapter 3 reveals that, even if instructors do not consciously think of their teaching as aimed at disciplinary enculturation, their assignments and judgments of student work may be tacitly informed by discipline-based expectations. Although this point has been developed elsewhere in WAC/WID research (e.g., Thaiss & Zawacki), Wilder’s articulation is particularly valuable because it argues by analyzing specific discourse strategies—the set of special topoi—in one disciplinary context.

Of course, if instructors more highly evaluate student writing that uses field-specific modes of argumentation, the next question

is what to do about it. Wilder takes up this pedagogical question in Chapter 4, where she weighs in on the debate over explicit genre instruction. This long-running debate concerns not only broad ideological objections to the WID project of supporting students' use of academic discourses—i.e., concerns about perpetuating unequal power relations by indoctrinating students into disciplinary discourses—but also more practical questions raised by Aviva Freedman and others of pedagogical effectiveness, for instance: Is it possible for students to learn to write genres out of the context of their authentic use (cf. Wardle)? Will directly teaching rhetorical strategies cause students to misapply or over-apply them in future tasks? Will it encourage them to ignore their already-acquired genre knowledge, which, while tacit, may be more flexible and sophisticated than knowledge from explicit learning? After citing studies that show positive effects of teaching disciplinary writing strategies (e.g., Geisler, MacDonald and Cooper), Wilder turns to the outcomes of an experimental study she conducted with her co-author Joanna Wolfe. In this study, the researchers trained four English professors in strategies for using the special topoi to guide their teaching. What they found is that students who studied in one of these courses more frequently and effectively employed the topoi in their writing than did students taught in the regular WAL sections. Based on this result, Wilder argues for an explicit approach to genre instruction that is “nonreductive” (120), meaning one that seeks to raise students' conscious awareness of discipline-based rhetorical strategies and how they can be used as heuristics rather than as a rigid set of rules or “templates” for writing.

In making this argument, Wilder develops three especially important points about explicit genre teaching. First, it seems to have different effects for students depending on their existing level of experience with the genre. Students with little to no prior experience can benefit from explicit teaching as it helps them catch up with their more experienced peers. In contrast, explicit teaching can foster among students who have already experienced success with the target genre a meta-awareness of their writing

strategies, highlighting for them the embedded nature of their writing capabilities and possibly fostering the reflective habits of mind needed to transfer their writing knowledge. Wilder's interviews with students (in Chapter 5) bear out these differences. Second, explicit instruction also involves making explicit the "thinking tools" or procedural knowledge (not just textual strategies) that experts employ when participating in the genre. Use of appearance/reality, ubiquity, paradigm, and other topoi can provide direction for students' reading and development of interpretations and not just the organizational moves they make in their writing. Third, explicit genre instruction may simply mean "turning up the volume" (125) on the rhetorical curriculum that already guides professors' courses. It may not, in other words, require that instructors completely revamp their current pedagogical approach—which can be an especially big risk for pre-tenure faculty who are concerned about time management and course evaluations (cf. Geisler for an extended discussion on this point).

In Chapters 5 and 6, Wilder turns to student and faculty responses to explicit instruction in rhetorical topoi. Chapter 5 reports on discourse-based interviews with eighteen students, six of whom Wilder interviewed twice over two years. These interviews revealed overwhelmingly positive effects of the explicit approach in terms of retention and transfer of learning. In follow-up interviews, some students were able to identify their use of the special topoi in essays that they had written for other literature courses. Some displayed declarative knowledge of the topoi, remembering them either by name or by the underlying concepts; others vaguely remembered the topoi but speculated that they had already become part of their tacit knowledge, informing their understanding of the drive toward "complexity" in literary analysis. One particularly memorable interviewee is Eric, who came to WAL with little to no experience writing interpretative/analytical essays. He expressed confidence that the explicit approach helped him catch up with his classmates, whom he perceived to be more experienced with the target genre.

Commenting on one of his papers, he explained that, “Anything that makes sense in this paper is an example of what I learned in [WAL], really, because I felt like I was that far behind from high school” (144).

Wilder also explores in Chapter 5 the frequently expressed concern that explicit genre instruction will “straightjacket” students, limiting their potential for creativity, innovation, or a sense of freedom in their writing. Wilder’s interview data suggest quite the opposite. Students reported a sense of being freed up to concentrate on their ideas rather than expending undue mental or emotional effort “figuring out what the teacher wants” in terms of overall argumentative strategy (or genre). To put it another way, if the genre of the assignment is made visible to students and recurring strategies for accomplishing the genre are laid bare—in this case, the special *topoi*—then students can concentrate on fulfilling the genre in nuanced, even innovative ways. Wilder puts this point in terms of saving students from needing to “[read] between the lines” (170) to figure out what is valued in the genre. Her interviews with students, with unusual exceptions, support this interpretation.

Interestingly, one of the most vocal critics among the students who participated in the experimental curriculum, Ed, turned out to be resistant not to the *topoi* or to being prompted to use them, but rather to the genre of interpretative/analytical essays more broadly. He explained that the genre’s focus on “evidence” and on expressing “unbiased” analysis—rather than allowing him to “just make [his] point”—felt too “dry” and constraining—“almost like a court document” (165). This student’s response is interesting because it underscores one of the major arguments of the book: The interpretative/analytic essay in undergraduate literature courses is a relatively stable genre that can feel constraining to students even if it is not taught explicitly.

As I suggested above, the argument Wilder makes in Chapter 5 is consistent with and corroborates findings from SFL-based genre scholars who endorse explicit genre instruction (cf. Christie and Derewianka; Schleppegrell). According to this scholarship, if

instructors do not support their students in understanding the genres they are assigning (i.e., to understand their underlying purposes and how those purpose are prototypically realized through language)—perhaps because instructors “assume you already know this stuff,” as one of Wilder’s student interviewees put it—then many students are in effect being deprived of the linguistic-rhetorical resources needed to make certain kinds of valued meanings. Wilder’s chapter affirms this social justice goal. But it also adds what I believe to be a more subtle point, which is that an explicit approach can assist high-performing students (not just lower-performing ones) by giving them a “metalanguage” with which to take conscious stock of their already-acquired genre knowledge. Explicit genre pedagogies, that is, can encourage a kind of meta-awareness that even critics of explicit instruction concede is useful (cf. Freedman). A second subtle point that Wilder makes is that, with the case of the rhetorical topoi specifically, it is not possible to make a sharp division between process- versus product-focused genre knowledge. Explicitly identifying the topoi, that is, can throw light on the procedural work of analyzing and interpreting literary texts in addition to the compositional work of developing organizational and argumentative strategies to be used in one’s writing.

In contrast to the mostly positive responses from students, in Chapter 6 Wilder turns to faculty perceptions of the explicit teaching of topoi. She acknowledges that all but one of the participating professors did concede that the explicit approach is probably more “effective and fair” (174) than the regular implicit approach. She then focuses the chapter on three faculty in particular who expressed resistance to the explicit approach. At least nine points of concern emerged in the interviews. According to her participants, explicit instruction may: (1) professionalize students too early, (2) reduce students’ pleasure from reading and writing about literature, (3) limit students’ creativity, (4) bypass the “struggle” that students need to experience to develop truly innovative or original arguments, (5) conflict with the field’s overall value on complexity in favor of “rational, clear argument,”

(6) overwhelm students, as the topoi (if they exist) are challenging to use effectively, (7) facilitate “B.S.,” as one of Wilder’s participants puts it, by enabling students to give the appearance of a sophisticated argument without substance, (8) provide an “unfair advantage” to students, who, upon using the topoi, will not have to figure out argumentative strategies for themselves, and (9) mislead students into thinking that the topoi are truly unique to literature scholarship (181-6).

Here, it is important to reiterate that on each of these points the students in Wilder’s study had strikingly different perceptions. For instance, students did not perceive that learning explicitly about the topoi diminished their creativity or reduced their pleasure in reading and writing about literature. In fact, the experimental group reported enjoying their WAL course just as much if not more than students in the control sections. Furthermore, in Chapter 3 the raters were shown to prefer the essays that used the topoi effectively and did not judge them to reflect diminished creativity. Regarding premature professionalization, the analysis shows that the professors’ pedagogical practices were already doing “professionalization” work, as revealed in their rating of student essays and in their classroom instructions, just not consciously so. Regarding the need for “struggle,” the students perceived that knowing more about the genre expected of them freed them up to do the hard work of forming interpretations. The general picture that emerges from these final chapters, then, is that students want and appreciate explicit guidance for their writing—a finding confirmed in other studies (see, e.g., Bartholomae and Matway)—while the professors were concerned about the repercussions of offering such guidance.

What are we to make of this fundamental difference in view? It seems to me that it is rooted in the students’ and professors’ different goals for writing, their different statuses with regard to the disciplinary discourse, and their different levels of investment in the field. Wilder’s discussion touched on the following points: The faculty interviewees were all successful students themselves.

At least, they all reached “insider” status in the field and did so presumably through a slow process of trial and error, with no short cuts, no road maps. Reading between the lines, I would suggest further that they all had positive experiences as undergraduate English majors, even though they did not learn about the topoi explicitly. Now, these topoi are so deeply engrained in their genre knowledge that they are unrecognizable to them as specialized knowledge. They are instead part of the “basic” work of academic writing that “students should understand by now.” In the view of these professors, there may be little to be gained from teaching the topoi explicitly but there is potentially a lot to be lost, including creativity, pleasure, and originality. Wilder offers a nuanced and frank discussion of these concerns, and from her discussion I do not see that there is an easy way to dissuade professors from having them, especially if they are already willing to concede that the approach is probably more effective and fair, as several resisters did.

The faculty concern that I do wish had received a bit more discussion in Chapter 6 was one expressed by “Professor Gregg,” who appears to be the most resistant of the four interviewees discussed in this chapter. One of his concerns was that the topoi are “widely applicable critical-thinking tools rather than rhetorical strategies unique to the discourse of literature scholars” (186), as Wilder paraphrases. Wilder connects this objection to the tendency to “universalize the rhetorical practices of literature scholars” (186). I agreed with Wilder’s assessment when first reading, but then found myself wondering to what extent Professor Gregg’s point is well-taken. Might certain topoi like appearance/reality, mistaken-critic, and ubiquity be characteristic of scholarship in other fields and subfields? I can certainly see these at play in applied linguistics, especially in work with which I am most familiar that uses discourse analysis. My suspicion—and I assume Wilder would agree—is that “complexity” and “originality” are valued across academic disciplines (surely with varying levels of emphasis), leading to a cross-disciplinary need to develop arguments that point out flaws in others’ reasoning in order to get at the “truth” (i.e., mistaken-critic,

appearance/reality). I suspect other disciplines as well make use of context and paradigm strategies both to reveal complexity and construct a stance marked by disciplinary rigor. It is difficult to say, then, whether these special topoi are unique to literature scholars without carrying out comparative analysis on other disciplines. It seems likely that, while the specific ways the topoi play out in other discourses are different (how they are used, how often, and through what means of expression), a broad description of the topoi themselves is shared. On this point, Michael Carter's twin concepts of meta-genres and meta-disciplines could be useful for teasing out the degree to which the special topoi Wilder examines are employed by scholars engaged in related ways of "knowing, doing, and writing."

While I am on the topic of limitations, Wilder herself concedes the weaknesses of the methodological approach reported on in Chapter 4. The pedagogical intervention was "quasi-experimental," as she puts it, because the WAL faculty who taught the special-topoi sections may have made use of the topoi in idiosyncratic ways. Likewise, crosstalk between the instructors of the control and experimental sections (the instructors were in the same department) may have resulted in several control-group instructors also teaching the special topoi. As Wilder acknowledges, it is difficult to know what "turning up the volume" on the special topoi may have entailed exactly in any given class section. It could have involved abstract discussion of the topoi, references to their use in assigned readings, class activities using them as interpretative heuristics, and any combination of the above. A more tightly controlled experimental study could have insisted on greater uniformity in instructional practices. At the same time, however, such a study would likely have raised additional problems. To make a "turning up the volume" approach feasible, instructors need the freedom to make use of the topoi in ways that suit their existing instructional approaches.

Trained in linguistic discourse analysis, I often found myself wanting a closer, more detailed analysis of students' texts, as well as explanation of the specific methods used to examine them. To

be sure, Wilder offers as examples excerpts from students' essays in which the topoi are used more and less effectively, and her commentary on these texts is convincing. But she does not explain the specific analytic steps she and her co-researcher(s) used to examine the papers. Questions I was left with included these: How many times did they read the papers? Did they agree on their operational definitions or the units of analysis for the topoi—for instance, could a topos be realized in one or two sentences or even a single phrase like *On the surface*? When examining the papers, did they allow for the possibility that discursal features other than the presence or absence of the eight topoi could account for more and less successful essays, features like a more or less committed style of stance-taking (cf. Lancaster) or use of metadiscourse (cf. Hyland)? Since these and similar questions are not addressed, replicating Wilder's study in other contexts would be difficult. The questions of how many topoi are used in a single paper, how effectively they are used, and to what rhetorical effect are questions contingent on the analytic approach.

Aside from these relatively small points, at the end of the day Wilder's argument for "turning up the volume" on the rhetorical curriculum in WAL—and by extension other courses in the disciplines—is subtle and convincing. Her review of the relevant research literature is comprehensive and impressively handled. She draws from a wide range of data including students' writing in both the experimental and control sections of the WAL course, discourse-based interviews with students and faculty, and ethnographic observation of an experimental WAL course. I would personally place Wilder's volume alongside empirical studies by MacDonald, Berkenkotter and Huckin, and Geisler, studies that Ellen Barton concluded "reflect a maturity in theoretical and methodological frameworks and contribute ideas with considerable value to the field of composition studies" (826). The very same should be said of Wilder's volume.

The practical implications of Wilder's research are clear. As she notes, a good audience for studies of disciplinary discourses is not just other WID professionals but faculty in other disciplines

who are interested in understanding the discursive particularities of their fields. I have shared Wilder's findings with faculty across disciplines at my institution who are designing writing-enhanced courses in their departments. Faculty across departments have used her findings as motivation to consider how their own reading and evaluation of students' writing may be influenced by subtle disciplinary, subdisciplinary, and idiosyncratic expectations (cf. Thaiss and Zawacki), ones that challenge the notion that there is such a thing as a single understanding of "good" academic prose. This is why I think Wilder's exploration of grading practices in Chapter 3 is so very important. It suggests that, when we read students' papers, we are not responding to the degree of sophistication in thought that is neutrally represented by the language; rather, we are responding to, and being positioned by, the language itself and thereby making interpretations about students' thinking and degree of engagement with the task. We need therefore to be attentive to the linguistic and rhetorical moves that we use in our own scholarship and to the ways we may respond to such moves when they are (or are not) mirrored back to us by our students. Finally, Wilder identifies clear directions for future research on writing transfer, and especially on the use of equipping both faculty and students with a specific metalanguage for articulating the rhetorical dimensions of their writing and assessment practices.

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