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## The Mysterious Incident of the Missing Title: Why Did Titular Concern Vanish from Composition Studies?

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# The Mysterious Incident of the Missing Title: Why Did Titular Concern Vanish from Composition Studies?

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How much time, if any, do first-year writing instructors spend in class discussing the importance of titles on their students' papers? Without looking at a mountain of lesson plans or interviewing a plethora of instructors from across the country, it is impossible to know what is and what isn't commonly taught in first-year composition courses.

Admittedly, introductory writing and research classes can vary greatly from institution to institution and even from instructor to instructor within the same department. However, judging by an examination of current First-Year Composition textbooks, Rhet/Comp scholars place little importance on discussing the effect of titles on student papers. Out of the most popular rhetoric and composition textbooks in use now, only a handful give any direction, however miniscule it is, about how and why students should compose a title to their work. When they do say anything about titles, much of the instruction focuses on issues of citation or formatting (i.e., where to put the title) instead of an explanation of titles as rhetorical tool that students should carefully consider[1].

[1] *Successful College Writing* is one exception as it has a slightly more extensive conversation about titles, including tips on how make the title more attention grabbing. However, it does not discuss in depth the reasoning behind why titles are crucial.

For example, the discussion of titles in the popular First-Year Composition textbook *Everything's an Argument* essentially consists of one sentence that reads, "Titles, headings, subheadings, enlarged quotations, running heads, and boxes are some common visual signals" (Lunsford et. al. 340). Apart from this article and its companion, "How to Win Papers and Influence Professors: Creating Positive First Impressions through Effective Titles," a search of the Writing Commons archive reveals a similar treatment of titles, primarily dealing with formatting in citations or on title pages. And these are examples that explicitly address titles in some way; many composition textbooks do not mention them at all. An interesting example is *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, which is organized in large part around the concept *genre*. As I will argue, titles can be an important part of establishing genre, and yet *The Norton Field Guide* does not discuss titles in any significant way.

If composition textbooks and resources barely mention them, we have to ask ourselves whether first-year composition instructors should pay any attention to titles. Aren't they,

like the student's name, simply a placeholder? In an already crammed semester, should we take the time to discuss what many consider a mundane detail not tantamount to the rest of the argument?

The answer to the latter question is a resounding, "Yes." Titles are significant, and through this article I hope to prove they are important in two key ways:

1. They are inherently connected with [genre](#) and give the first indication of the "appropriate" way to read a text.
2. They can be used both to *create* an audience and a writer.

In the end, my goal is to persuade rhetoric scholars and first-year composition instructors that we need to spend more time discussing the importance of titles with our students.

## Establishing first impressions through genre

One important aspect of titles that is commonly overlooked is that students can use them to develop a [tone](#) for an essay. A well-crafted title can serve as the perimeter wall of the "genre function," and in so doing can be a tool for not only regulating but also constituting meaning in a text.

Building off the work of scholars in linguistics, education, communication, and composition (primarily Composition scholar Carolyn Miller), Anis Bawarshi coins the term "genre function," in his article of the same name, as an alternative to what Michel Foucault in "What is an Author" calls the "author-function." To Foucault, the author function expresses "the space left empty by the author's disappearance" in structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory (Bawarshi 345). The author-function doesn't refer to the literal author of a work, but instead to the regulatory function that the author serves to delimit what is and what isn't a work of value. In other words, "it refers to the author's name, which in addition to being a proper name, is also a literary name, a name that exists only in relation to the work associated with it," and therefore, bestows on a work its cultural status (336). But as Bawarshi points out, Foucault's author-function only accounts for certain "privileged" discourses[2].

[2]Here, Bawarshi sees the author-function as referring mainly to canonical texts. For instance, a literary scholar may claim to study Hemingway or Jonson, but works outside the cannon or marginalized mediums, comic books for instance, don't achieve value even when a prominent author in that genre is attached to the work. Also, author-function doesn't account for the regulatory process associated with "everyday speech" that comes and goes.

What we need argues, Bawarshi, is "an overarching concept that can explain the social roles we assign to various discourses and those who enact and are enacted by them. Genre is such a concept" (337).

As far as first-year composition courses, what we can take away from Bawarshi's argument is that high school and college students don't have the authority to take advantage of the author function. They don't have established names or inherent [ethos](#). However, they could make use of the genre function. Since every discourse can fit into one genre or another no matter how obscure or marginalized it may be, and since even genres exist on a hierarchical schema, the genre function works as a broader regulatory device and can in fact subsume the author-function under its purview. The entrenched hierarchies perpetuated by the author-function are surmountable because genre broadens the boundaries of our inquiry, and as a result of its more encompassing nature, the genre function allows for all discourses and all writers to be heard, whether the writer is Hemmingway or a first-year writing student (337).

However, genre's function in a text is much more than regulating discourses within particular value categories; it gives the reader the paradigm necessary to decode the text. As Miller points out, "It is through the process of typification (genre) that we create recurrence, analogies, similarities. What recurs is not material situation but our construal of a type. Successful communication would require that the participants share common types" (157). Genres inform our understanding of a text by taking the new experience or discourse and making it "familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities" to a certain genre (156-157).

To understand the implications of this concept, I return again to Bawarshi. He cites a useful example from Heather Dubrow in her 1984 survey of genre theory, in which she asks readers to consider the following paragraph:

The clock on the mantelpiece said ten thirty, but someone had suggested recently that the clock was wrong. As the figure of the dead woman lay on the bed in the front room, a no less silent figure glided rapidly from the house. The only sounds to be heard were the ticking of the clock and the loud wailing of an infant. (1)

Dubrow asks how we make sense of this discourse. What details should we pay attention to as significant? What state of mind should we be in as readers? According to Bawarshi, "knowing that the paragraph appears in a novel with the title *Murder at Marplethorpe*, readers can begin to make certain interpretive decisions as to the value and meaning of specific images, images that become symbolic when readers recognize that the novel belongs to the genre of detective fiction" (340). For instance, the rapidly fleeing figure becomes a suspect in the woman's murder. If, contrarily, the paragraph is from *The Personal History of David Marplethorpe*, the specter of murder dissipates as the departing person could be seeking help while the baby, possibly Marplethorpe himself, describes his mother's costly accident. It's a useful example because "not only does the genre function in this case constitute how we read certain elements within the discourse, allowing us to assume certain subject positions as readers of the discourse, but it also constitutes the roles we assign to the actors and events within the discourse" (340).

What Bawarshi fails to acknowledge here is that what he is calling “genre” in this instance is, in fact, a title. The text itself doesn’t change, just the name that he assigns to the novel, which demonstrates the inescapable connection between title and genre. This isn’t to say that a title is always a clear revealer of a text’s genre[3], but in many circumstances, the title is the reader’s first indication of the “appropriate” way to read the text, as in the example of *Murder at Marplethorpe*. Just as first impressions can have a long-lasting effect on interpersonal relationships, the first hint at the text’s genre—what we may call the first impression for the relationship between the reader and the text—can impact the reader long after he has turned the cover. Genre not only provides but forces upon the reader certain expectations from the start. An inappropriate title can have a devastating affect on a text if the created expectations aren’t met. For instance, if in *The Johnson Conspiracy* there isn’t intrigue, secrecy, and a malevolent force working in the shadows, the novel, which might otherwise be an exceptional piece of writing, will disappoint much of its initial [audience](#).

[3]I could cite any number of ambiguous titles as examples of a title’s limitations as revealer, but David Sedaris’s *Naked*, a collection of memoirs about various, and very loosely connected, incidents in his life is a readily available text that doesn’t expose its genre in the title. However, for every *Naked* out there, I could cite a *The Martian Chronicle* to show that titles do have an impact.

In our composition classes, we spend countless hours working on our students’ [introductions](#), teaching them to grab their audience’s attention and hook them into the argument so they will continue reading, but we ignore the fact that if the student’s title confuses the issue, alienates their audience, or simply bores them, even the most provocative and enthralling introductions will have a daunting, poor first impression to overcome. Some arguments won’t be able to recover. How many times have we received student papers with titles like, “Death Penalty” or “Paper #2”? These titles simply serve as placeholders and fail to establish an effective tone for the paper. If they establish any kind of first impression, it’s one of laziness or ineptitude, regardless of whether that’s a true indication of a student’s work.

Even worse can be a title that sets up an expectation and fails to deliver. Recently, my students completed an [Advertising Analysis](#) assignment, and mixed in with the numerous students with placeholder titles like, “Nike Ad Analysis,” I had one that read, “Delta: Marketing using the Cognitive Process.” The title peaked my interest because it appeared to indicate a more conscientious and academic approach to the analysis than I was seeing from many of the other first-year students. Unfortunately, the student used “cognitive process” because he thought it as a fancy way of saying “intentional,” and his paper remained broad and never addressed the advertiser’s thought process. Although the student’s paper wasn’t any worse than many of his classmates’, I felt a bit more let down by his paper after reading it, and there’s a chance I could have graded it more harshly if I hadn’t recognized that the disappointment stemmed from my heightened first impression[4].

[4]The student had a solid Intro paragraph as well, which only cemented the first impression that began to form after reading the title and eventually lead to the expectations and disappoint when the paper didn't deliver.

On the other hand, a captivating title can create instant ethos. How many times while perusing the shelves of the local bookstore have we inspected a book and bought it based primarily on its title? More than a few. A student's title can grab our attention in much the same way and encourage us to "buy" the argument. For example, in that same batch of advertising analysis papers, I received one with the title, "The *True* Meaning of Love—Getting Laid." The analysis was of an advertisement marketing diamond rings by depicting women as more willing to engage in sex once a man had proposed to them[5], and the student made an argument about the ad's demeaning depiction of women and skewed vision of "love." The title works on at least two levels 1) the language and juxtaposition of "love" and "laid," although crass, does its job of grabbing reader attention 2) more importantly, it's a tongue-in-cheek reference (demonstrated in part by italicizing "true") to a stereotypically male perspective on relationships, which the student argues is the way the marketers are approaching this ad. The title of this paper begins to establish credibility for the student as it criticizes the marketer's vision in the ad through effective sarcasm, and it indicates a playful insightfulness that the student carries throughout the paper.

[5]Natan Jewelry ad.

Not all student titles will be successful, but at the very least, they should help to move the argument forward, remembering that by tapping into a genre the author can impart to her audience the tools necessary to an "appropriate" reading of the text.

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## Creating an Audience

In his influential essay "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," Walter Ong argues that audiences casts themselves in fictional roles while reading. In Ong's words, "An office worker on a bus reading a novel of Thomas Hardy is listening to a voice which is not that of any real person in the real setting around him. He is playing the role demanded of him by this person speaking in a quite special way from the book, which is not the subway and is not quite 'Wessex' either, though it speaks of Wessex" (12). If we are to look closely at Ong's claim here, isn't much of what he calls role playing in fact genre interpreting? In many cases[6], the audience does fictionalize itself, but the guidelines by which it establishes the borders of its adopted role are governed by genre. There are certain themes that an audience expects to encounter when reading a Thomas Hardy novel—anguish, longing, a sense of being trapped by convention—and far from contradicting those expectations, the voice that the office worker hears constitutes those themes, reinforcing the "appropriate" role and giving it credence. In

other words, the role in which the audience casts itself isn't arbitrary. Ong claims that the readers are conforming themselves to the "projections of the writers they read[7]," but does the author's name have that much of an impact on the reading, or is Ong attributing to writers what is actually genre? Even if we were to completely remove the author's name from a text, the form would still remain. And as Miller claims, "Form (genre) shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way (in a certain role)" (159).

[6]I don't feel Ong's assertion that the audience must fictionalize itself holds up in every circumstance. In his Hemmingway example (12-13), where the author has consciously included the reader as an interacting character in the story, there certainly is an element of role playing on the reader's part. However, Ong doesn't take into consideration the myriad stories that leave the reader as a spectator to the action. In that situation, the office worker reading a novel on the bus is simply a bystander, viewing from a safe distance the events taking place. Unless the author chooses to break that wall between text and audience by conspiring with the audience as Hemmingway did, there is no transfiguration of the office worker into an active character. His role in life may not resemble the fiction he's reading, and much like watching the local news on television, we don't usually transpose our real life with the glamorized violence and entertainment news we're watching.

[7]Ong is probably responding to Foucault's author-function when asserting that the writer determines the role in which the audience plays. But as Bawarshi points out, author-function only recognizes a small portion of all discourses—"privileged" texts.

Because genre is so pivotal for role casting, and titles and genre are inherently tied together, titles can be viewed as the foundation that a fictionalized audience is built off of. The title is the first indicator of the role that an audience is supposed to play. An obvious Fantasy title, *Dragon Lance* for instance, is going to create very different expectations and roles than a Romance title, *Lover's Rendezvous*. But more to the point, we need to express to our first-year composition students that their titles can be useful tools for *inducing* certain responses in their audience. For example, an essay about photography techniques titled *Painting with Light*—which will cast the audience in the role of art enthusiast—will have a very different affect on the audience if the same essay is titled *How to Compose an Artistic Photo*—which calls for a more sterile, systematic reader. The latter example is going to reproduce the conventions that the audience used to read every other "How To" manual they've come across, and since "we perform an activity in terms of how we recognize it—that is, how we identify and come to know it"—the audience will, without realizing it, view the current essay through those terms[8](Bawarshi, 339). When a student chooses a genre (such as academic essay, editorial letter, narrative, proposal, etc.) and/or a title that reflects a specific genre, he needs to take into account the fact that the audience he creates will be based on the guidelines of the genre, whether that's his desired result or not. Since titles are the first indicators of a genre, students can't ignore or marginalize the title's impact on their audience.

[8]This brings to mind Burke's idea of a terministic screen—that we come to a text with certain terminology, and what we take from the text is based on our terminology. An interesting project

would be to look at how genre works in conjunction (since each genre incorporates its own intrinsic set of term) with terministic screens (Bizzel and Herzberg).

## Creating a Writer

Talking with my own students on a one-to-one basis, and actually, thinking back to my own days as a student in first-year composition, it seems to me that [writer's block](#) is an especially pernicious problem among first-year writers. Every composition teacher has been approached by that student having difficulty getting his essay started. Even when she knows what direction she wants the argument to go, the words don't always form themselves into acceptable sentences, and the student spends much of her time writing and rewriting the same idea or staring at a blank page while she waits for inspiration to strike. I don't think it's a coincidence that first-year writing, the site of this writer's block, is often the first place where a young writer takes the time to consider her audience. According to composition scholar Peter Elbow in his interestingly titled essay "Closing My Eyes as I Speak[9]," "An audience is a field of force. The closer we come—the more we think about these readers—the stronger the pull they exert on the contents of our minds. The practical question, then, is always whether a particular audience functions as a helpful field of force or one that confuses or inhibits us" (94). Whether the audience is a group outside the university, her peers, or the professor (who is always present in the student's consciousness because of the professor's inescapable position of authority), the desire to impress the audience is relentless in its sway over the young writer. For some composition students, the pressure to write academically is immobilizing.

[9]Consider the implications of an academic article so informally titled. Why did Elbow feel it necessary to include the subtitle "An Argument for Ignoring Audience"?

Elbow claims that when faced with an inhibiting audience, the writer should ignore audience altogether. But ignoring audience at any stage in first-year composition, especially when that audience is determining the student's grade in the course, isn't as easy as flipping a switch. Although Elbow's suggestion sounds rational, it may not be practical. There is, however, another possibility that could achieve the same results. Through genre, we know that we can endow our audience with certain expectations. At the same time, by changing what the audience expects from a text, we also change the expectations that the writer must achieve. Take, for example, the kinds of titles commonly seen in our scholarly English journals. "The Phenomenology of Error[10]." "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class[11]." "Intellectual Property and Composition Studies[12]." "Teaching the Political Conflicts: A Rhetorical Schema[13]." The ethos we hope to achieve as scholars is reflected in the titles we attach to our work. If we were to change the title of "Phenomenology of Error," for instance, to something more pedestrian, such as "Fun with Grammar," or something more youthful, such as "Why You Hatin on Errors?," the initial expectations that are attached to genre are also changed. I'm certainly not suggesting that there be a revolution in how we title scholarly articles, but for a first-year writer, a title that releases her from scholarly expectations may be just as freeing as ignoring audience altogether.

[10]Williams, Joseph.

[11]Berlin, James. *College English*, Vol. 50, No. 5 (Sep., 1988), 477-494.

[12]Lunsford, Andrea and Susan West. *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 47. No. 3 (Oct 1996), 383-396.

[13]Lazere, Donald. *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 43. No. 2 (May 1992), 194-213.

What may be even more interesting is how a title and its corresponding genre can be used to channel the direction of a student's essay, casting not only the audience but the writer as well in a role. The title of this essay, "The Mysterious Incident of the Missing Title," works to exemplify this point. Its informal, almost playful nature influences such examples as "Why You Hatin on Errors?," an example that I never would have conceived had I set more pragmatic expectations with a title like, "Titular Dynamics and the Phenomenology of Genre[14]." The tone we set at the beginning of a work has the tendency to carry the writer through to the end. In that way, a title will not only direct how a work is read but also how it is written. If we want our students to leave First-Year composition writing as scholars, then teach them how to title like scholars. If, on the other hand, we want our students to find *their voice*, teach them the impact that a title has on them and the reader and encourage them to experiment.

[13]At the same time, the subtitle (which is still fairly informal), "Why did titular concern vanish from composition studies?," situates the argument within the genre of scholarly essays and constitutes its voice within academia.

As we teach [argumentation](#) to our first-year students, it's important that we don't get so wrapped up in teaching structure and style that we forget about how fundamental form and genre are to our understanding as writers and readers. As the first indication of genre and the first thing our audience is going to read, a title can establish the tone and expectations that will guide a text from beginning to end. It's important, too, to recognize that titles are more than just a name; they are rhetorical tools to be used. The right title has the power to create an audience, unblock writer's block, and influence the direction of the author. That much power should not be ignored.

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