

I. DISCIPLINARY WRITING

Discipline (n) - A branch of learning or knowledge; a field of study or expertise; a subject. Now also: a subcategory or element of a particular subject or field.

- Instruction or teaching intended to mould the mind and character and instil a sense of proper, orderly conduct and action; training to behave or act in a controlled and effective manner; mental, intellectual, moral, or spiritual training or exercise. Also applied to the effect of an experience or undertaking (as, study, adversity, etc.) considered as imparting such training.

- A system or method for the maintenance of order; a body of rules for conduct or action; a way of doing things.

When writing within a discipline, it is important that you follow the **conventions** of writing within that discipline.

These “rules” can range from big-picture suggestions to guide inquiry and methodology to sentence-level concerns. For example, disciplinary conventions might include:

- **field-defining methods** - “In Communication Studies, we use theories and techniques from rhetoric and media studies to explore how communication functions in our culture, how communication is created and contested, and how communication works to shape our experience and understanding of the world.”
- **common types of inquiry** - “The role of the reviewer is to go beyond the immediate emotional response of an average audience member and discover instead what a performance was trying to express and if it indeed failed or succeeded in doing so.”
- **organization** - “Laboratory Reports usually include a brief experimental objective (usually one sentence), a short introduction (to provide the context for the research), description of the methods used, a detailed report of the data obtained (including relevant tables and figures) and an interpretation of the results.”
- **writerly style** - “Psychological writers try to tell a good story (one that has a point, and one that always makes a unique contribution to the literature in psychology) in a way that a layperson (even one without expertise in psychology) can understand.”
- **rules about language use** - “Business writers use Paramedic method. Paramedic method requires: the use of active voice, limited use of prepositions, and the use of short, concise sentences.”
- **citation style** - “Papers written for English courses should use the citation style outlined by the Modern Language Association (MLA)”

Writing (and thinking) in an interdisciplinary way asks you not only to learn and follow the conventions of a discipline, but to think about why those conventions are in place and how they help us to produce knowledge. Once you know this, you can decide which conventions from each discipline will best serve your project.

In order to help consider the relationship between disciplinary conventions and the knowledge they help produce, you might consider asking the following questions of each of your disciplines:

- What **types of questions** are being asked in the field? Does the discipline concern itself with “What,” or “Why” or “How” questions? In what ways? Can you think of examples?
- Is there a **common type of writing** in the discipline? Does this type follow a set structure? If so, how does that structure reflect the priorities of the field?
- What are the most **common research methods** of the field?
- What **type of evidence** is most commonly used in the discipline? In other words, what gets analyzed? Researcher-produced data? Pre-existing texts? Primary or secondary documents? Researcher-produced narratives?
- What is **the role of the writer**? How objective should one be? Is the writer expected to examine their own position in relation to the research inquiry?

II. MULTIDISCIPLINARY WRITING

Essentially, multidisciplinary writing is a midway-point between writing within a discipline and writing an interdisciplinary paper. Essentially, the following examples are types of writing that fall short of true interdisciplinary inquiry:

Encyclopedic writing – A topic is approached through a range of disciplines one after another, but no connection is drawn between the knowledge yielded through these approaches. (Ex: The Wikipedia entry on “River Oykil” includes sections on “Geography,” “History,” and “Flora and Fauna” but does little to draw this information together).

Contextualizing writing – A paper written within a dominant discipline is interrupted with a brief inclusion of information or methods drawn from a secondary discipline, but no connections between the two are really drawn. (Ex: An English paper may begin with a historical account of the author’s life without ever drawing on that account or its methods to influence its argument about a text.)

Composite writing – A paper may cover the same topic from multiple disciplines that share methodology, but if there is no cross-communication about how these disciplines affect one another’s findings, then the paper is not yet interdisciplinary. (Ex: The report of the experiments on the human immune system and skin and bone density.)

III. INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING

Theorists of interdisciplinary study tend to divide these projects into two categories. Although the terms vary (those listed below are adopted from Julie Klein), most theorists define these categories by their purpose. Therefore, when you begin your project, you'll want to decide:

Do you want to answer a particular question?

If so, you'll want to try a METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.

The goal of methodological interdisciplinary research and writing is to produce new information. There are several ways to do this, but each involves **applying the methodology of one discipline to the field of inquiry of another.**

Do you want to encourage a new way of thinking about a problem?

If so, you'll want to try a THEORETICAL APPROACH

The goal of theoretical interdisciplinary research is to produce new ways of approaching questions, rather than answering particular questions. There are several ways to do this, but the mark of a theoretical interdisciplinary project is that **the core concerns of one discipline help to define the core concerns of another.**

IV. CONVENTIONS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING

By definition, interdisciplinary writing must lack a set of conventions – if it had them, it would be well on its way to becoming a discipline. However, almost all interdisciplinary writing shares one move in common. **Interdisciplinary projects almost always take the time to explain why they are interdisciplinary.** Because stepping outside of a discipline is almost a rebellious act (you're saying that the existing structure doesn't provide you what you need to get the knowledge or theory you want) you'll need to justify this act within the paper itself. This might happen in your "methods" section, if you're writing up an experiment, or it might happen in your argument for significance or at the end of your lit review ; it's up to you where you tell your readers your reasons for choosing an interdisciplinary approach. What's important is that it's clear to them – and you – that those reasons exist.

SOURCES

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