

Unit 1: Initial Encounter

Length: 1,000 words

Audience: Instructor & Peers

The linguist John Swales defines discourse communities as “groups that have [similar] goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve those goals.” That is, discourse communities can only have similar interests and shared knowledge because they continually engage in the production, distribution, and consumption of written (as well as oral and visual) texts. This kind of textual exchange defines a discourse community, sustains it over time, and allows it to adapt to changing social conditions. In other words, discourse communities share not only interests and knowledge, but *language*, and the particular uses of language within a community keep that community going. The idea behind Unit 1 is to get you thinking about how people in your field—your discourse community—communicate.

You can approach this assignment in a number of different ways. For example, you can:

- Visit your last co-op employer and conduct some field research, noting carefully all the kinds of texts that are used at the site.
- Examine a website of a professional organization in your field as a sort of artifact of your field’s discourse community (e.g. American Society for Computing Machinery, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, Association for Computing Machinery, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, or the IEEE’s Computer Society).
- Examine a whole issue of a professional or scholarly journal in your field in the same way (e.g. ASCE’s *Civil Engineering* magazine or any of its 32 peer-reviewed journals, such as *Mechanical Engineering*).

In your Unit 1 paper, you’ll want to provide a brief summary of the text or collection of texts you’ve chosen, followed by a careful analysis of the document’s rhetorical situation. You might find it helpful to consider this document as a kind of artifact of your chosen field. Imagine that you are an archeologist of the future and that this document represents everything you know about this community. What can you tell about how your field uses language? What kinds of writing do people in your profession create, consume, and distribute? How is it delivered? Who are its specific audiences? What are its specific purposes? These are the kinds of questions you should ask to begin formulating an argument about the way language is used in your discourse community by proxy of the source you have selected.

As you analyze your text/s, consider the following:

- What can you tell about how this community uses language?
- Do the texts seek to inform, instruct, analyze, persuade, argue, or evaluate? In other words, what is their purpose?
- Do the texts write to members of the community or to outsiders—or to both? Are different audiences targeted by different contributions? Are the texts primarily targeted to equals, experts, or beginners? In short, who is the audience—and how do you know?
- Do the texts as a whole have a thesis (i.e. argument)? Do individual contributions have theses? How can you tell?
- Are the texts as a whole characterized by certain tones, voices, or styles? Is there a lot of variation in persona, or are the contributions to the collection consistent in this regard?

- If there are advertisements and announcements, what does this suggest about the discourse community?

Content is not necessarily the focus here. You have to consider it when discussing the purpose and thesis of your texts, but you don't have to read everything to perform this analysis, and you don't have to fully understand it. Instead, focus on the look, feel, and use of language to create a picture of how language is used in this community—and what values or goals you learn about the community by virtue of its written language.

Like all writing in this class, your Unit 1 paper should be fully cited using the conventions of your field. If you are unsure as to what citation style you should be using, consult me.

Include a word count on your draft and final Unit 1 paper.

Unit 1 Grading Criteria:

- Focuses on a text that is appropriate to one's professional or academic field.
- Carefully attends to issues of purpose, thesis and persona.
- Analyzes writer's orientation, context, audience and genre as a function of the rhetorical situation.
- Creates a picture of language use ("show *and* tell") that links effectively to the values of the field.
- Shows effective use of citation conventions.
- Demonstrates careful crafting of style and arrangement with respect to the primary audience.
- Fulfills length and genre requirements.