

Introduction

Essential Actions for Academic Writing is a genre-based writing textbook that draws from extensive studies of the writing demands made upon novice academic students. By “novice,” we mean students who may need particular academic support to succeed in the next stage of their higher education. They are novices in the sense that they have little experience with the expectations, genres, and/or language that are required in their college, university, or graduate classes. Novice students may be international students, English learners, multilingual students, or first-generation college students. They may also be students who did little writing (or little writing in English) in their prior education or who have written nothing but formulaic five-paragraph essays. They may be students who identify themselves as struggling writers or as confident writers elsewhere but not in school. We wrote *Essential Actions* for all these students: in first- and second-year writing classes, community colleges, graduate preparation and support classes, and ESL writing classes including foundation year, pathways, or bridging programs.

Because these writers, many of whom use English as a second or additional language, have yet to be initiated into their disciplines, and because large-scale studies of writing assignments indicate a wide variety of writing demands (Melzer, 2014; Nesi & Gardner, 2012), *Essential Actions* focuses on exploring and practicing the key *actions* that appear consistently and often in combination across academic assignments and genres, such as explaining, summarizing, synthesizing, and arguing.

We wrote these course materials for a very simple reason: we couldn’t find a writing textbook for our classes. Though we teach very different student populations in very different contexts on opposite coasts of the U.S., the goals for our writing classes are remarkably similar: to help novice undergraduate and graduate students understand how to develop the rhetorical flexibility to write effectively across a potentially bewildering array of tasks throughout their academic and professional careers. In writing this textbook, we have combined genre theories, research into academic writing, proven pedagogical practices, and accessibility for teachers and students in order to meet a variety of novice student needs.

Guiding Principles

Essential Actions is built on these principles, which represent our core beliefs about writing:

■ **There's no such thing as universally "good" writing.** As students take classes across the university or college (if they are in a liberal arts program or taking general education courses) and in their specific majors and minors, they will need to write in a wide range of ways that are effective in different disciplines or for different academic and professional audiences. No writing class can hope to prepare students for every future task, and presenting a universal form (typically the five-paragraph essay) as a panacea is inadequate, at best (Caplan & Johns, 2019). But we can teach our students to "read" their classes and assignments, understand their instructors' expectations, analyze their readings and assignments, and make effective (or, if they prefer, unconventional) choices even when facing new tasks.

■ **We write in genres**, which in essence means that all writing responds to a context that encompasses the writer's identity, the reader's expectations, the purpose of the text, and the conventions that shape it (Tardy, 2019).

■ **Writing is a "social action"** (Miller, 1984) or, more often, a series of actions that are combined in different ways to reach the writer's goal and respond to externally assigned tasks (Martin, 2009). These actions are more than the traditional **modes** (e.g., description, comparison, process, argument) because they rarely occur by themselves but are often combined in complex writing tasks. All student writers need to know the techniques and language needed to define, summarize, synthesize, interpret, argue, comment, analyze, and reflect. They also need to know how to combine the actions in extended writing.

■ **Most academic writing tasks draw on sources**, from the textbook and lecture to the internet and library databases. Successful student writers know how to analyze prompts, identify sources, conduct independent research, evaluate the reliability of sources, paraphrase, quote, cite, summarize, and synthesize in the context of specific genres. These skills are challenging and essential.

■ Although writing, composition, and ESL departments are often aligned with the humanities, **students will write across the curriculum**. Therefore, *Essential Actions* includes models and tasks that practice writing in a variety of disciplines, including data commentaries, empirical research papers, policy briefs, and short-answer test questions.

■ **Language is at the heart of good writing instruction**, whether students use English as their first, only, second, or additional language. By embedding language instruction in the writing class, we are not suggesting that grammatical accuracy (e.g., subject-verb agreement, commas, run-on sentences, articles and the suchlike) are the sole hallmarks of good writing, although they may all be important in some contexts. Nor do we believe that “ESL grammar” should be relegated to an appendix and taught out of context. Instead, we believe that all student writers need access to what Schleppegrell (2004) has called “the language of schooling”—that is, the grammar and vocabulary resources that allow students to engage effectively in the actions of academic writing. There is no magic list of words and phrases that students can memorize and trot out just to impress the reader. Instead, all writers need to understand how their language choices construct the ideas they are expressing, the stance they are taking, and the text they are shaping. Therefore, **Language Boxes** are integrated throughout the units in contexts where students can immediately apply the grammar, vocabulary, and metadiscourse (e.g., signaling phrases, connectors) in their own writing.

■ Above all, **academic writers need to develop rhetorical flexibility** to move comfortably among disciplines, interrogate new genres, and choose linguistic resources to make their texts do what should be done.

What Is Not in This Textbook?

Essential Actions includes the elements that are essential for academic writing instruction while providing flexibility for a wide range of programs and instructors teaching in face-to-face and online classes. It deliberately differs from other writing and composition textbooks in these ways:

- ❑ Neither “the essay” nor “the research paper” are prominent, although both are included, specifically the argument essay and both library and empirical research papers. Though Melzer (2014) in his extensive study of academic writing assignments across the U.S. college curriculum found that essays and research papers are the two pedagogical genres mentioned most often by faculty, these terms have become so general that they have become meaningless and, as a result, end up limiting students rather than expanding their repertoires (Russell & Yañez, 2003). In *Essential Actions*, **we instead show students how to apply the essential actions of academic writing to a wide range of pedagogical, professional, and disciplinary genres**—such as literature reviews, press releases, discussion board responses, and magazine profiles.
- ❑ There are no long readings. The texts included here are quite short and designed as models for students to analyze as they prepare to write. **The readings students are assigned should depend on their needs, interests, and the situations in which they are studying.** Thus, readings should be selected by you, the writing instructor, and not mandated by textbook authors who are unfamiliar with the teaching and learning contexts where you are working.
- ❑ We have avoided lengthy discussions of rhetorical theory, writing studies, styles, and techniques. Our goal is not to teach rhetoric as a discipline but rather the rhetorical principles that apply to student writing. *Essential Actions* **is relatively short and economical, and most of its pages are devoted to activities and tasks.** Supporting information and additional examples appear in the teachers’ manual.
- ❑ Not everything written in academic settings is an argument, and simply knowing something about *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* does not guarantee a successful student text. Therefore, there’s a unit on argument, but there are units on other typical actions, too. **When learning to argue, students explore how to construct effective arguments using claims, evidence,**

sources, examples, and counterarguments. However, composition instructors will find a discussion of rhetorical appeals in Unit 9 (Analyze) as a disciplinary lens with which students can analyze different types of argument.

- ❑ Reference and citation styles vary across contexts and often take up too much textbook space, even though this information is available online or from university libraries. Instead, **we focus on the need for and rhetorical use of citation throughout, including negotiating contested definitions, responding to readings, supporting arguments, analyzing texts, interpreting data, and identifying gaps in prior research.** An Online Source Use Appendix is available on the companion website (www.press.umich.edu/elt/compsite) with instruction in finding, evaluating, citing, paraphrasing, and quoting sources.

How the Content Is Organized

Part I: Understanding Texts and Contexts

The units in Part I create the basis for the rest of the textbook by introducing students to rhetorical situation, genre, and register.

- ❑ Unit 1 introduces the framework for understanding how to approach any new writing task, the Rhetorical Planning Wheel. Through examples of emails and short-answer (“ID”) questions, this unit shows students how to analyze any writing situation in terms of its rhetorical components: writer’s role, audience, purpose, structure, evidence, language, and conventions.
- ❑ Unit 2 helps students understand the concept of genre by comparing and analyzing everyday, professional, and academic genres. In addition, students learn a nuanced understanding of register to write effectively in their assigned genres. This includes the language choices used to construct and connect ideas, establish stance, and create cohesion.

Part II: Exploring Essential Actions

Each of the units in this section is devoted to one of the essential actions in academic and professional writing by modeling and providing practice in the genres and the language that support the action. The units include these features:

- ☐ **goals** for students to accomplish in the unit
- ☐ clear, concise **explanations** of writing techniques
- ☐ **models** of student and professional texts, adapted for length and comprehension, that students analyze through guided questions
- ☐ **activities** to practice each goal of the unit
- ☐ **Language Boxes** with grammar, vocabulary, and metadiscourse relevant to the writing techniques presented in the unit, each with practice activities
- ☐ **writing tasks** with short assignments throughout the unit to consolidate the actions, language, and techniques
- ☐ **two major assignments** that put the action into practice: *a pedagogical genre* (a task assigned for the purpose of teaching a particular skill or content area such as a summary or argument essay) and a *genre in action* (a professional or disciplinary writing task that simulates an authentic writing situation such as a press release or op-ed column).

The actions in Part II are:

- ☐ **Explain** (Unit 3), including techniques for writing definitions, glosses, process explanations, and cause-and-effect explanations.
- ☐ **Summarize** (Unit 4), including practice in analyzing the structure of and summarizing different types of source texts for different purposes.
- ☐ **Synthesize** (Unit 5), containing three types of synthesis (comparative/contrastive, informational, and integrative), starting with synthesizing two texts and expanding to a review of the literature.
- ☐ **Report and Interpret Data** (Unit 6), building the components of a data commentary based on a table, chart, or graph.
- ☐ **Argue** (Unit 7), including analysis of argumentation in different disciplines, making and supporting claims, using sources and examples, and dealing with counterarguments and contradictory findings.
- ☐ **Respond** (Unit 8), using three strategies for response as well as critique, evaluation, and reflection.

- ❑ **Analyze** (Unit 9), applying a disciplinary framework (the rhetorical appeals of ethos, logos, pathos, and kairos) to focus, reorganize, and synthesize information, culminating in rhetorical and visual analyses.

Part III: Integrating Actions

Here students engage in the difficult work of combining the actions in different genres and contexts. These units provide ideas for longer projects that require students to write effectively in pedagogical, disciplinary, and personal genres. The projects include traditional academic assignments (e.g., an empirical research paper and a problem-solution inquiry project or term paper), as well as a project that stretches students' resources as writers (a text transformation project). In the final project, students learn how to write a personal statement for a university or scholarship application, a vital and challenging genre.



Companion Website

A companion website is available at www.press.umich.edu/elt/compsite, containing:

- ❑ **The Online Source Use Appendix**—a unit of instruction on finding, evaluating, paraphrasing, quoting, citing, and referencing online and library databases sources.
- ❑ **Charts, tables, and handouts** for exercises in the textbook that can be printed for use in class or completed digitally as classwork or homework.

How to Use This Content

Essential Actions is not designed to be taught cover to cover in a single semester! However, we recommend that all classes start with Part I, Units 1 and 2, since they lay the groundwork for everything else in the book. The Online Source Use Appendix can either be presented in its entirety near the start of a course, or in sections as the need arises (e.g., paraphrasing, quotation, and citation when teaching summary and synthesis, saving the sections on choosing and evaluating sources for teaching argument and research papers).

Here are some alternatives for working with Parts II and III:

- ❑ You might choose one or two projects from Part III as major assignments for your course and teach the actions from Part II that your students will need for success in those assignments. For example, the problem-solution inquiry project is a library research paper for which students need to explain, summarize, synthesize, and respond to sources.

- ❑ Alternatively, you could select the actions in Part II that best align with your curriculum, learning outcomes, and your students' needs. If time allows, you might end the course with the project from Part III that is most appropriate for your context, or use the writing tasks in Part II as your major assignments.
- ❑ We expect teachers to choose between the Pedagogical Genre and the Genre in Action assignments in Part II rather than attempt both, although they can certainly be taught in sequence, too. For example, after students have written a summary (a pedagogical genre), they could rewrite their paper as a press release (a professional genre) and reflect on the differences.
- ❑ Although we have provided models that demonstrate the targeted actions, writing techniques, and language, you may prefer to replace or supplement them with texts that are more relevant to your students' academic careers, educational context, or interests. Many writing teachers find it useful to adopt a theme for their course and align all the readings and assignments with that theme. You could follow the themes suggested in Project 1 (bilingualism) or Projects 2 and 3 (health and nutrition), or others such as globalization, ethics, government, community activism, and environmental protection.

In all substantial writing tasks in *Essential Actions*, we recommend a writing process that includes modeling, planning, drafting (multiple rounds), conducting peer feedback, revising, performing self-review, and editing. However, we have left the assignment directions open so that you can specify the timeframe, length, sources (if relevant), and format.

For more ideas, including options for assessment, please see the companion volume, *Genre Explained: Frequently Asked Questions and Answers about Genre-Based Instruction* by Christine Tardy, Ann Johns, and Nigel Caplan (University of Michigan Press).

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