A Civil Style: Reexamining Discourse and Ethical Principles in Composition
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**Introduction: Civil Discourse and Composition**

If today’s calls for civil discourse are increasingly urgent, they are also increasingly focused on higher education. The Association of American Colleges and Universities called 2012 a “crucible moment” for college learning and democracy’s future, which Andrea Leskes extended with a “plea” for civil discourse as a specific responsibility of higher education (Leskes 2013). By the 2016 U.S. presidential election, over 100 college presidents signed open letters calling for civil discourse on their campuses; many other colleges issued related statements,¹ and events in the past year at Middlebury College and the University of California Berkeley show the complex challenges of fulfilling those expectations.² In such missives, civil discourse is generally characterized as respectful exchange with verified information and open-mindedness toward multiple views, and college campuses are highlighted as sites for preserving such values.

In an editorial in *Inside Higher Education*, compositionist John Duffy highlighted first-year writing courses as long-established sites for such efforts. “For much of its history,” he argued, “the first-year writing class has been an arena for teaching values and virtues like honesty, accountability…[and] fair-mindedness.” Indeed, not only has composition teaching endeavored to “create for all citizens civic engagement through access to the language uses, spoken and written genres, discourses, vocabularies of government, law, and culture” (Bleich 2005), but composition scholarship specifically champions principles related to judicious treatment of readers and alternative perspectives. These principles, discussed in more detail in the next section, are described variously as a standard of ethics for academic

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writing (Harrington 1981), generosity toward readers (Stotsky 1992), and honesty and mutual respect between writer and reader (Duffy 2017b).

To date, discussions like these have especially focused on describing and theorizing ethical and civil standards for writing, rather than connecting those principles to patterned language use or style. In other words, they tend to identify shared values but not the ways these values are manifest in word- and sentence-level choices. In this way, they are consistent with historical and theoretical developments in composition in the late-20th-century. These include, especially, the turn away from linguistics and grammar (e.g., see Connors 2000, Kolln and Hancock 2005, MacDonald 2007, Butler 2008), and the social turn emphasis on genre context and social action rather than language. Activity theory and rhetorical genre studies since the 1980s, for instance, tend to frame discourse as tangential or reflective rather than constitutive; David Russell’s widely-read overview of activity theory describes, “Genres are not constituted by formal features, then, but by recurring social actions that give rise to regularities in the discourse that mediates them” in a given activity system (1997, 226; emphasis mine). By 2009, Amy Devitt described that three decades of genre-based research had “largely…set aside” language or form, overwhelmingly conceptualizing genres as “acting in social and cultural contexts” (2009, 27). Methodologically, this paradigm means that genre analysis conventionally focuses on “the interactions of people with texts” via ethnographic and case study methods (Russell 1997, 226), rather than also on patterns that recur across texts (Aull 2015b).

Composition scholars of style, rhetorical grammar, and discourse studies suggest that a result of the separation between language, on one hand, and composition research on genres and student writing, on the other hand, is that the field lacks a framework for approaching rhetorical choices at multiple levels of discursive meaning (Butler 2008), including stylistic grammar (Ray 2015) and recurring lexis and grammar (Aull 2015a, Aull and Lancaster 2014). Instead, style is often conflated with mechanics only.

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3 Although, interestingly, Crowley suggests that the “best hope for the contribution of linguistics to composition has always lain in its potential to enrich students' mastery of style….” (Crowley 1989, 487).
and/or is seen as entirely idiosyncratic, as discussed by Khan, Olinger, and others in this volume. A related result is that, while we can point to shared values concerning civil exchange, we have little research on how such values are enacted in recurring discourse: we have, that is, little research on the discourse of civil discourse. Such research and related teaching, I propose, could be an important contribution of composition research focusing on style in academic writing. Current concerns about U.S. public debate as polarized, divisive, and dysfunctional (Duffy 2017a, 242) make it a particularly important time to offer it.

To this end, this article makes a case for discourse analysis that illuminates how civil exchange is realized in patterned language choices. To do so, it brings together research on rhetorical principles in composition, on one hand, with research on patterned discourse in academic writing, on the other. This synthesis helps illuminate what I am calling diplomatic evidentiality as a part of a civil style in academic writing. This two-part rhetorical quality underscores diplomacy, in that writers draw explicit attention to others’ contributions and potential concerns, and evidentiality, in that writers draw explicit attention to evidence and how it substantiates their contribution. It is a quality, in other words, that emphasizes both “rhetorical listening”—a stance of openness in relation to other texts and views (Ratcliffe 2005)—and a writer’s own convictions, in that order.

My synthesis between rhetorical principles and linguistic features has two aims. One is to highlight shared values in academic writing across disciplines that are related to civil exchange and are re/inscribed at the level of discourse. The second is to show that bringing together rhetorical and linguistic scholarship helps propel urgent discussions about civil and ethical writing practices beyond the level of rhetorical principles alone, to encompass their (often tacit) enactment in discourse.

**Ethical and Rhetorical Values in Composition**

Compositionists have debated the role of discussions related to personal, political ethics in writing classrooms for over a century. Late-19th-century writing curricula suggested students’ writing should reflect on the ethical nature of society and “matters of moral obligation and improvement” (Jolliffe 1989, 171), while twentieth century developments suggested students should read multicultural texts in
order to gain a greater appreciation for diverse ideologies (Knoblauch and Brannon 1993), or should develop “rhetorical authority” to argue persuasively about their own viewpoint, “achieving consensus on a pluralistic grouping of ways to do academic discourse” (Bizzell 1992, 258-259). As Friend described in the 1990s, compositionists “often envision themselves as agents of social change who try to promote critique of dominant ideologies and empower students to become active participants in the larger political world” (Friend 1994, 548).

While these discussions focus on which viewpoints are presented, discussions like those noted in the introduction focus on principles for presenting any given viewpoint. Such scholarship, in other words, concerns values related to how writers engage readers and develop ideas, regardless of the topical (or propositional) content of those ideas. Duffy describes this as a focus “on the ethics of rhetorical practices,” including the “fair-mindedness in considering the other side”—rather than, for instance, views explicitly addressing “economic injustice, environmental destruction, gun violence, or other topics” (2017a, 244). Put another way, first-year composition courses aim to teach students that regardless of the topic, writing must “begin with relationships of trust grounded in expectations of honest exchange” (Duffy 2017b). David Harrington suggests that such honest exchange may be new to early college writers: “Ethical writing…means disciplined attention to a number of processes, such as insistent inquiry to get to the heart of a problem…with which many beginning college students have had little previous experience” (Harrington 1981, 13). For Harrington, such “insistent inquiry” seems related to being open-minded about hypotheses and main ideas: “One technique used by many of the most productive scholars,” he writes, “is to formulate not just the hypothesis that one expects to prove but several alternative hypotheses covering as many plausible solutions as one can imagine” (1981, 14).

The focus on openness toward readers and alternative explanations is likewise emphasized in other areas of composition scholarship. Feminist rhetorical traditions, for instance, encourage looking and listening instead of only speaking one’s own view (Ratcliffe 1999, Foss and Griffin 1995, Lunsford 1995), practices also described in Leskes’ characterization of civil discourse (Leskes 2013). Years of work on the “big five” personality traits inspired the emphasis on “openness” in the Framework for
Success in Postsecondary Writing (CWPA, Poe, Inoue, and Elliot 2018). In research on writing across the curriculum, Thais and Zawacki show that two key characteristics of academic writing are that it will show that writers have been “open-minded” and have anticipated a reader who may object or disagree (2006, 5-7). Alternatively, research suggests that writers who produce “one-sided” writing, rather than writing with openness to alternative views, are less successful (Salig, Epting, and Rand 2018, 315). These discussions point to shared values related to the need for academic writers, even as they develop their own claims, to show thoughtful attention to readers, possible objections, and alternative explanations. They also imply that these values are related to written language, though they tend to focus more on the values themselves rather than on written choices that enact such values across texts.4

Style and Ethical Values in Composition

Composition scholarship on style shows more specific interest in connecting ethical writing practices with writing strategies. In Out of Style, Paul Butler reviews Aristotle’s association between style and three of the four virtues (later listed by Theophrastus), especially clarity, appropriateness, and correctness without ornamentation. Equally illuminating in Butler’s review is that Aristotle’s ideas fully conflate rhetorical principles and language use: he described failure to fulfill the virtues as the fault of “bad taste in language” (Butler 2008, 35). In Style: An Introduction, Brian Ray offers a more recent historical perspective, tracing the prejudices of early 20th-century composition scholarship that “equated eloquence with virtue and flatness with moral vices such as ‘laziness’” (Ray 2015, 109) until more nuanced approaches to language, influenced by structural linguistics, temporarily arose in the mid-twentieth century in composition studies.

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4 An exception from 25 years ago is Stotsky’s effort to illustrate four umbrella principles for academic writing—respect for the purpose of academic language, for other academic writers, for integrity of the subject, and for the integrity of the reader—via a handful of scholarly passages from published academic writing. Stotsky closely analyzes the passages to show how those principles are fulfilled or violated. As Fulkerson detailed, Stotsky’s impulse to provide textual examples of ethical standards of academic writing was rather undermined because some of the writing seemed to break the rules espoused by it; furthermore, “whether [the examples] are representative is arguable” (Fulkerson 1992, 238).
Mike Duncan and Star Vanguri’s edited collection *Centrality of Style* includes several chapters that investigate ethical writing and style. Kurlinkus notes a number of historical claims that conflate style and ethical writing habits, including: “Let the virtue of style be defined as ‘to be clear’” (Aristotle); “We owe readers an ethical duty to write precise and nuanced prose” (Strunk and White); and Joseph Williams’s “Write in a way that draws attention to the sense and substance of writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author” (Kurlinkus 2013, 9). These maxims, like Duffy’s rhetorical virtues for composition, underscore attention to the reader, and frown upon one-sided attention to the writer (a sentiment also reflected in Strunk and White’s advice to place the writer in the background). For his part, Kurlinkus wants to move such discussions more pointedly to stylistic choices as manipulation of the audience, and style, thus, as something for which writers must take responsibility. Questions he poses for style along three different ethical continuums include point of attention (where do the author’s stylistic devices direct the audience’s attention?); apparent mediation (does the rhetor’s style appear deceptive or just?); and felt agency (does the audience feel silenced or encouraged to analyze and critique the text’s construction, reasoning, etc.? )” (10). Like Duffy, Kurlinkus sees ethical writing in terms of a relationship, but he sees style similarly: “I thus define ethics, like style, as an always local and contextualized process by which one negotiates an ‘appropriate’ relationship between rhetor and audience.” (11).

In the same collection, Duncan draws attention to the overlapping nature of written strategies and ethical writing practices, which college writers are in the process of learning. He writes, “An insistence on a thesis, on a specific question of interest, on warranted evidence for claims, on supporting citations…all these add power. Once a student knows how these work…they become… ethical friends” (162). In his discussion, Duncan emphasizes the overlap between ideas and the writing strategies used to describe them: “Style and content are the same thing. The form of the discourse empowers its content (162).

Also in *Centrality of Style* and most directly addressing written stylistic features and their relationship with civil critique, Zak Lancaster applies systemic functional linguistics appraisal theory to track interpersonal style in writing. He shows, for example, how Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers’ written style makes their critique of Chomsky polite and indirect, rather than attacking: they use qualifiers like
seems and usually to soften the claims; they place Chomsky’s use of evidence (versus Chomsky the person) in the theme position; and they show positive evaluation prior to their critique (Lancaster 2013, 199-201). The positive evaluation (or concession) that precedes their critique is the only statement that places Chomsky (rather than his views) in the subject position (i.e., Chomsky presents reams of evidence...).

Lancaster’s analysis of Cohen and Rogers’ style demonstrates how recurring language-level choices make their critique less personal. The writers’ use of Chomsky’s view and the/that claim, for instance, provide a grammatical way to position the idea rather than the person as the point of departure for the critique. In so doing, the writers construct a “critically distanced stance” rather than a personal, attacking one (200). Their additional use of hedges seems and usually (rather than, e.g., completely or frequently) suggests their negative evaluation leaves some space for objection. Lancaster underscores that students can conduct analyses of important sub-genres such as critiques in order to recognize dialogically expansive choices (e.g., this seems to be the case) and dialogically contractive choices (e.g., this is definitely the case, which use what Williams calls “intensifiers”). In the next section, I build on Lancaster’s analysis to more specifically consider what recurring features seem related to a civil style.

**Diplomatic Evidentiality in Academic Writing**

Lancaster’s description of expansive and contrastive choices offers one way to consider how academic writers both support their own view, on one hand, and attend to others’ views—potential questions, disagreements or exceptions—on the other. Balancing expansive and contrastive choices furthermore seems to me to provide one a way to frame how to be diplomatic while also resisting dangerous forms of consensus (Hooks 1989). More pointedly, I see discourse patterns discussed by Lancaster and described below as contributing to what I am labeling diplomatic evidentiality, an aspect of civil style wherein written features both open and close dialogic space, by leaving room for readers’ reasoning and potential objections while also developing and emphasizing the writers’ ideas.

Research in composition and in applied linguistics explores written lexical and grammatical features commonly referred to as “stance” markers, or “validity markers” or “evidentials.” These markers
help adjust knowledge claims by expressing less or more certainty or scope vis-à-vis a claim. These include the hedges *seems* and *perhaps* discussed by Lancaster, which help adjust epistemic stance to leave room for alternative perspectives. Swales describes the long-standing, widespread use of hedges as “rhetorical devices both for projecting honesty, modesty, and proper caution in self-reports, and for diplomatically creating research space in areas heavily populated by other researchers” (Swales 1990, 175). Hedges are also described as displays of indirectness and/or politeness that reduce the imposition on the reader (Hinkel 2006). Indeed, corpus analysis of academic phrases used to entertain possible objections shows that they tend to be indirect rather than direct (e.g., *It could be argued that* rather than *you may object that*) (Lancaster 2016, 442).

While stance markers like hedges downplay claims, stance markers like boosters and generality markers can help writers strategically emphasize the certainty or scope of their contribution. Also called “amplifiers” or “intensifiers,” boosters are words such as *clearly, certainly, and without a doubt* (e.g., *the findings clearly suggest that*) that show full certainty toward claims made; (Hyland 2005). Generality markers such as *every or all* emphasize the wide applicability of a claim (e.g., *all of these examples display that*) (Aull, Bandarage, and Miller 2017). Frequent use of these features is associated with spoken rather than written discourse (Hinkel 2006), but boosters can be used strategically to emphasize the contribution or evidence of the writers (Lancaster 2011). In addition, published academic writers sometimes use generalizations, especially in the beginning or end of academic essays, in order to show urgency about a topic or claim, e.g., *everyone agrees that the most prosperous states in the world are well-established democracies* (Aull, Bandarage, and Miller 2017). Finally, presenting one’s stance diplomatically can be aided by concede-counter moves that acknowledge or concede contributions to alternative perspectives before countering them (e.g., *Gladwell is correct that...However*) (Aull and Lancaster 2014, Thompson 2001).

For students, creating discursive space for concession and potential disagreement can be a new expectation of college-level writing. Research shows that published academic writing in the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA) academic subcorpus displays a closer balance
between certainty and possibility, while early college writers err heavily on the side of certainty (Aull 2015a). In addition, new college students' frequent use of generalization markers contrasts the more circumspect stance features in advanced student and published discipline-specific writing, suggesting that students are still learning to account for potential exceptions or alternatives in the scope of their claims (Aull, Bandarage, and Miller 2017).

Attention to written choices like hedges, boosters, generality markers, and concede-counter moves can also help highlight disciplinary and genre-based differences. For instance, in published research articles, Hyland shows that there are more stance features—both more hedges and more boosters—in Philosophy research articles, as writers outline interpretive reasoning and stake their own claims. By contrast, there are fewer hedges and boosters in natural science disciplines in which the research process rather than the writers’ reasoning is foregrounded (2004, 2005). At the same time, all studies noted in this section suggest that typically, academic writing regardless of discipline will show a kind of diplomatic evidentiality, in that it tends to be indirect when introducing objections or critiques and to balance expansive and contractive choices. To return to Lancaster’s example passage, diplomacy is realized in Cohen and Rogers’ concession and the use of a hedge in their critique (italicized and bolded below, respectively), and evidentiality is realized in the detailed counter they subsequently offer (the three ways they outline after the quote below). They write, “Chomsky presents reams of evidence for the [propaganda] model….Nonetheless, Chomsky’s view of the media and the manufacture of consent seems overstated in three ways. First…”. The grammatical structure of this example furthermore places Chomsky in the grammatical subject position in the concession, but his view in the subject position in the critique. These language-level choices at once show cautious diplomacy in the writers’ critique as well as support and conviction in their assertions.

Attention to Civil Style in the Writing Classroom

Students can analyze features of what I am calling diplomatic evidentiality in both their reading and their writing. For instance, I have students annotate the subjects of critiques (or what I call the “leading actors” in a critique), as well as hedges, boosters, generality markers, and concessions regularly:
in their peers’ drafts before peer workshop, in their own drafts before they turn them in, in the scholarship they read for class, and in the freely-available, A-graded student papers from the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP) (Römer and O'Donnell 2011). In one annotation task, students put a box around all words and phrases they see as contracting dialogic space, or closing space for exceptions or objections (e.g., words like obviously or all); they put a circle around all words or phrases they see as opening (or expanding) discursive space by leaving room for potential questions or objections (e.g., words/ phrases like might or not all). After annotating throughout a term, students become more and more adept at recognizing how writers use language-level features to create discursive space for questions and alternatives as well as develop their own contribution. By way of concise examples, I offer two passages from MICUSP below that my students and I have annotated and discussed. In the passages, choices that expand discursive space appear in bold, while contractive choices are underlined.

The first passage appears in a research paper written by a second-year graduate student in Natural Resources, titled “Impact on atmospheric carbon dioxide levels.”

In my analysis, I assumed that sequestration is equivalent to fixation (as it represents the earth’s ability to sequester carbon in vegetation). However, one could also consider man-made carbon sequestration and storage (CCS) techniques in devising a practical, comprehensive strategy to reduce GHG concentrations (for instance, the possibility of trapping emissions from coal-fired power plants and burying them underground). I also applied learnings from my literature review to assess which levers could in fact be altered and by how much. The results of the scenario modeling show that the most effective lever in altering atmospheric carbon dioxide levels is emissions: the range in carbon dioxide concentrations that result from halving or doubling emissions is the highest, at 1,229.9 ppm in year 2200 or 2,072.5 ppm maximum.

This student’s writing shows diplomatic evidentiality by (1) emphasizing the student’s own assumption and later, conclusion, and by (2) noting an alternative consideration in detail. First, the student writer focuses on her analysis, then outlines an alternative approach. She then moves back to her own application, which shows an approach that was open to multiple assessments. In the final sentence, the student asserts what there is in fact a most effective lever, which is described thereafter. This example also

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5 MICUSP paper label: NRE.G2.07.1. Note that students selected a gender when submitting papers to MICUSP, and I use the corresponding pronouns in this analysis.
illustrates how possibility modals like *could* are used in academic writing to hedge an assertion; other examples include *To this I would reply...*, *Some would argue that...*, and *It could be argued that* (Lancaster 2016, 447, 449).

The second example passage appears in a proposal written by a third-year graduate student in Biology, titled “Linking scales to understand diversity.”

If small-scale 'details' matter, *we need to ask* how much complexity we need to incorporate into large-scale models *if we seek to* both understand and predict the dynamics of global quantities (Pascual 2005). *I would add that* these details *do not have to be* small, since *we are not always* studying global quantities. *We may also ask* whether patterns are shaped by extrinsic factors or dynamics—*perhaps it matters* that the system is open. *The best hypotheses* of complex systems remain parsimonious while appealing to processes occurring on other spatial, temporal, or organizational scales to describe a pattern.

This student’s writing shows diplomatic evidentiality by (1) attending to existing research (by Pascual), (2) drawing the reader into the writer’s reasoning (via *if*-statements and self-mentions); and (3) asserting the student’s own view. The student writer offers hedged assertions *I would add that* and *do not have to be* followed by dialogically-expansive, hedged phrases *not always, we may also ask, and perhaps it matters* (bolded above), before she moves to the dialogically-contractive outline of what is proposed as *the best hypothesis.*

**Concluding Remarks**

Ellen Barton describes evidentials as “the underlying perspective on knowledge represented in a text” (Barton 1993, 146), a description that emphasizes the interconnectedness of patterned language, ideas, and the reception of those ideas. In the discussion above, I have outlined academic writing strategies that suggest that one shared perspective underlying academic knowledge is that it requires diplomatic evidentiality—an important aspect of a civil style that foregrounds the reader and potential objections as well as the writers’ own contributions. These strategies help support a style, in other words, that leaves room for alternatives and invites readers into writer reasoning (Hyland and Tse 2004, Swales 1990) and that shows a writer’s view as one among existing views and potential disagreements (Aull and

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6 MICUSP paper label: BIO.G3.02.1
Lancaster 2014). Such strategies are textual manifestations of the open-mindedness espoused by Duffy, Thais and Zawacki, and others. In this way, they help us think about how to provide textual anchors for describing why and how civil discourse is realized in academic writing at a time it is sorely needed.

References


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