6.7: Research Activity: Interviewing Academic Professionals

In order to learn more about the conventions of academic discourse, interview a professor at your college. You may wish to talk to one of the teachers whose classes you are currently taking. Or, you may choose to interview a teacher whom you do not yet know personally, but who teaches a course that interests you or who works in an academic major that you are considering. In either case, the purpose of your interview will be to learn about the conventions of research and writing in your interlocutor’s academic discipline. You can design your own interview questions. To learn about designing interviews, read the appropriate section in Chapter 7 of this book. To get you started, here are three suggestions:

• Ask to describe, in general, the kinds of research and writing that professionals in that academic field conduct. Focus on research goals, methods, and ways in which research results are discussed in the field’s literature.
• Discuss how a specific text from the academic discipline, such as a book or a journal article reflects the principles and approaches covered in the first question.
• Ask for insights on learning the discourse of the discipline.

Establishing Authority in Academic Writing by Taking Control of Your Research Sources

Good writing is authoritative. It shows that the author is in control and that he or she is leading the readers along the argument by skillfully using research sources, interpreting them actively and creatively, and placing the necessary signposts to help the readers anticipate where the discussion will go next. Authoritative writing has its writing and its writer’s voice present at all times. Readers of such writing do not have to guess which parts of the paper they are reading come from an external source and which come from the author him or herself.
The task of conveying authority through writing faces any writer since it is one of the major components of the rhetorical approach to composing. However, it is especially relevant to academic writing because of the context in which we learn it and in which it is read and evaluated.

We come to academic writing as apprentices not only in the art of composing but also in the academic discipline which are studying. We face two challenges at the same time. On the one hand, we try to learn to become better writers. On the other, we study the content of our chosen academic disciplines that will become the content of our academic writing itself. Anyone entering college, either as an undergraduate or a graduate student, has to navigate the numerous discourse conventions of their academic discipline. We often have too little time for such navigation as reading, writing, and research assignments are handed to us soon after our college careers begin. In these circumstances, we may feel insecure and unsure of our previous knowledge, research, and writing expertise.

In the words of writing teacher and writer David Bartholomae, every beginning academic writer has to “invent the university.” What Bartholomae means by this is, when becoming a member of an academic community, such as a college or a university, each student has to understand what functioning in that community will mean personally for him or her and what conventions of academic reading, writing, and learning he or she will be expected to fulfill and follow. Thus, for every beginning academic writing, the process of learning its conventions is akin to inventing his or her own idea of what university intellectual life is like and how to join the university community.

Beginning research and academic writers let their sources control their writing too often. I think that the cause of this is the old idea, inherent in the traditional research paper assignment, that researched writing is supposed to be a compilation of external sources first and a means for the writer to create and advance new knowledge second, if at all. As a result, passages, and sometimes whole papers written in this way lack the writer’s presence and, as a consequence, they lack authority because all they do is re-tell the information presented in sources. Consider, for example, the following passage from a researched argument in favor of curbing video game violence. In the paper, the author is trying to make a case that a connection exists between violence on the video game screen and in real life. The passage below summarizes some of the literature:

The link between violence in video games and violence in real life has been shown many times (Abrams 54). Studies show that children who play violent video games for more than two hours each day are more likely to engage in violent behavior than their counterparts who do not (Smith 3). Axelson states that some video games manufacturers have recognized the problems by reducing the violence in some of their titles and by rating their games for different age groups (157). The government has instituted a rating system for videogames similar to the one used by the movie industry in an effort to protect your children from violence on the screen (Johnson 73). Alberts and Cohen say that we will have to wait and see whether this rating system will prove to be effective in curbing violence (258).

This passage lacks authority because every sentence in it is taken from an external source. Where is the writer in this paragraph? Where are the writer’s voice and interpretations of the research data? What new insights about the possible connection between video game and real life violence do we get from this author? Is there anything in this passage that we could not have learned by reading the sources mentioned in this paper? This writer has let external sources control the writing by composing an entire paragraph (and the rest of the paper is written in the same way) out of external source segments and nowhere in this passage do we see the author’s own voice, persona, or authority.
So, how can the problem of writing without authority and without voice be solved? There are several ways, and the checklist below provides you with some suggestions.

- Always remember to use research for a rhetorical purpose—to create new knowledge and convey it to your readers. Except in rare cases, writers are not compilers of existing information. Resist the urge to limit your research to simply summarizing and quoting external sources. Therefore, your ultimate purpose is to create and express your own theories and opinions about your topic.

- Talk to academics or professionals to find out what constitutes authoritative writing in their field. It could be the presence of a strong voice, or the use of particular research methods and techniques, or a certain way to present the results of your research. Later on in the chapter, you are offered an interview project designed to help you do that.

- Create annotated bibliographies to make sense of your research and make the ideas and theories you read about, your own. Try the annotated bibliography activity later on in the chapter.

- Use only reliable sources. For advice on locating such sources, see Chapter 11 of this book.