Using a Mentor Text

Students are asked to write in a number of disciplines and genres, with unique conventions in terms of organization, style, and more. However, these aspects of writing are often not explicitly taught. One strategy for demystifying this knowledge is to analyze a **"mentor text"** – a sample text written in the same genre for the same purpose, audience, and context. Mentor texts can be used to look at different elements and can be used at different points in the writing process. Mentor texts are not necessarily "perfect" pieces of writing, especially when looking at student texts. The point, though, is to get a sense of the "moves" these writers make. This handout covers how to look at the discourse, stance, organization, transitions, style, format, and grammar of mentor texts. This handout gives specific suggestions for how to use your mentor text early in your writing process(invention, brainstorming, drafting) and later in your writing process (revision, editing). We invite you to find a mentor text and use these strategies to investigate the writing conventions of your field.

Discourse and Stance

Demystify the disciplinary discourse
Disciplinary discourse is the language used by a field. Often, these conventions are not explicitly taught. Instead, one of the best ways to learn the discourse of a particular field is to take look at the language experienced academic writers use and how they use it. Here are questions to analyze disciplinary discourse use in the mentor text:
- Which terms are defined? Why are they defined?
- Which terms are accompanied by a citation?
- Which terms are considered common knowledge in the field?
- Which abbreviations are spelled out? Which are not? Why?
- Which terms are repeated again and again without use of synonyms?
- Which terms are used to signal that the writer is referring to a particular school of thought or theoretical framework?
- Does the writer introduce new terms to the field? If so, what language is used to signal this?

Review the mentor text's stance
In US academic writing, stance (or the writer's attitude or position) is always expressed and is an approach the writer uses to guide the reader through the text. Stance is expressed through hedges (the softening of a claim), boosters (the strengthening of a claim), evaluative adjectives and adverbs, modification of verbs, and other moves. To analyze stance in the mentor text:
- Go through the text and highlight all uses of stance-taking language.
- Reflect on what you've found: in which sections is stance-taking language used?
- What types of stance-taking language are used? What is the impact on the reader?

In the later stages of your writing process, you can do the same analyses on your draft and try to describe your own stance. Does your stance reflect standards in your discipline?

Organization and Transitions

Map out the mentor text's structure and organization:

To understand the underlying structure of the mentor text, do a "reverse outline" (an outline of an existing draft). Reverse outlines can be used to analyze any size of text—from a full book, to a chapter/article, to a part of a chapter/article.

Early in your writing process, reverse outlines can be useful to look at existing mentor texts. First, decide on the unit of analysis (i.e. chapter? Section? paragraph? Sentence?). Then, number the units. Then, create an outline, in which you summarize each unit (what that unit says). This analysis will help you see the focus of each unit. As you outline, you could also note each unit's role in the overall text (what that unit does). This additional step of analysis will help you see the underlying function of each unit, which may serve then as an outline for your text.

Later in your writing process, you may want to make a reverse outline of your own text. You can then compare the reverse outline of your daft to that of the mentor text. You can choose to use reverse outlines to compare the organizations of the full draft or choose to focus on a just a section.

Analyze the mentor text's "flow":

When writing "flows" it is because ideas are connected between paragraphs and between sentences. At the sentence level, writers create flow when they move from old/given information to new information, use signpost words (i.e. first, second, then, therefore), use demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these) to point back to already-mentioned ideas, and by repeating keywords.

To analyze the mentor text for flow:

At the paragraph level

- Identify the main idea (puzzle, gap, claim, problem, question) of this text? Where does it first appear?
- How many sections does the text have?
- How are the sections ordered and what is the logic behind that order?
- Use your reverse outline to identify how the author moves from one idea to another
- What work does each section do in articulating, demonstrating, advancing, or complicating the text's main idea?

At the sentence level

- Focus on first and final sentences of paragraphs to see how writers introduce and transition between ideas.
- Highlight the writer's demonstrative pronouns, signpost words, keywords, and synonyms for those keywords. Where and how are they using these?

Early in your writing process, underline the devices your mentor text uses to create flow. How does the writer move from old information to new? How are signposts and demonstrative pronouns used? Later *in your writing process,* you

can do the same analyses on your draft and compare your transitions to those of your mentor text. Are there any strategies you could borrow?

Scrutinize the mentor text's signposts

In US academic writing, writers are expected to guide the reader through a text's organization and ideas by using different types of signposts: forecasting statements, subheads, topic sentences, linking phrases (i.e. in addition, however, for example).

To analyze how the author of your mentor text guides the reader, do the following:

- Copy all subheads and first sentences of paragraphs to a document and read through them: could a reader pick up on the argument and understand where to find certain kinds of information just based on subheads and topic sentences?
- Highlight all forecasting statements and linking phrases. Which kinds are used? Where are they used? Can you tell why?

Early in your writing process, underline the different signposts in your mentor text. How does the writer use them to make their text easy to navigate? Later *in your writing process,* you can do the same analyses on your draft and compare your signposts to those of your mentor text. Are there any strategies you could borrow?

Style, Format, and Grammar

Check the mentor text's citations and format

Not sure which citation style you should be using? Writers can decide how much emphasis to put on a source of information by using different citation types: citation only, mention, gist, paraphrase/exact reproduction, and summary (see the CWC's handouts on different citation styles [here](#)). To analyze citation use in the text:

- Choose a section of the mentor text and highlight all uses of these different citation types.
- Which citation type is most prevalent? Why do you think this is?
- Which citation types are used sparingly? Can you tell why the writer is choosing to break from the dominant pattern to use this citation type?

Early in your writing process, it can be useful to look briefly at a text's citations and formatting to determine what style is typically used in a discipline. Compare the style in the mentor text with our handout on MLA, APA, Chicago and more. *Later in your writing process,* you may want to compare your citations to your mentor text's for accuracy. Do your citations contain the same information, in the same order?

Investigate the use of active and passive voice in your mentor text:

The active and passive voices are grammatical constructs. In active voice, the agent (the doer of the verb) is the subject of the clause (i.e. The man ate the broccoli); in passive voice, the agent is buried or not stated (i.e. The broccoli was eaten by the man; The broccoli was eaten). Some fields favor active voice, some fields favor passive voice, but all fields use some of each. Analyze when and why these voices are used can help guide your own decisions (see the [CWC's handout](#) for more on active and passive voice). To analyze the mentor text for active and passive voice:

- Select a section of the mentor text and label each sentence as active or passive. About what percentage of this section uses the passive and what percentage uses the active?

- Examine how the writer is making choices about the active and passive voice. Do you see a pattern?

Early in your writing process, you may look at a mentor text's use of active and passive voices to make decisions about how to write your own text. *Later in your writing process*, you may revisit your mentor text to ensure you are following disciplinary standards.

Notice the use of verb tenses and pronouns

Verb tenses are used in different sections of a text and for particular purposes vary by field. For instance, present tense is often used when talking about literature (the author's intent is timeless and these events are always happening), whereas history writing often uses past tense (specific actors participated in these events at a specific point in the past). Use your mentor text to answer the following:

- Choose a section to focus on and label each verb tense (past, present)
- Why are particular verb tenses used at different points? Can you see a pattern?

Similarly, different disciplines use certain pronouns in their writing. Use your mentor text to look at the following:

- Where do you see pronouns being used? Are they first person (I or we), second person (you) or third person (they, them)?
- Why are those pronouns being used in those contexts?

Early in your writing process, examine your mentor text's use of verb tense and pronouns. *Later in your writing process*, use your observations to help revise and edit these elements in your own writing.

An ongoing way to use mentor texts: Keep a language journal

A Language Journal is used to keep track of language insights, questions, and pieces of language picked up while reading and listening. You could consider this journal to be a patchwork of the different lessons or takeaways you've learned from various mentor texts. Keep this journal handy when reading/listening in academic contexts. To keep a language journal focused on academic English:

- Decide whether you want to create an electronic or hardcopy journal
- As you read your mentor texts, jot down:
    - Phases you could re-use in your writing
    - Sentence templates you could re-use in your writing (see the Academic Phrasebank for examples)
    - Insights about how language is used for particular purposes
    - Questions about language use that you could bring to a mentor or tutor

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Adapted from "Using a Mentor Text during the Writing Process," developed by Michelle Cox, English Language Support Office Director at Cornell University and "Learning from a Mentor Text," by University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center (Adapted and Expanded from Lisa Emerson, Massey University)