

Register Framework: An Effective Mode for Assessing Argumentative Writing

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Abstract. In light of Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper uses the field-tenor-mode framework as an analytic tool to help students produce and analyze argumentative writing. The text to be analyzed was selected from the book *A Writer's Reference with 2016 MLA Update* authored by the founder of WAC Writing Program of the Education Institute in Harvard University. It's typical and referential for the purpose of this paper. The discourse markers in the text were highlighted and analyzed to address two issues: how to achieve the consistency of field, tenor and mode in an argumentative essay, and what implications does the register consistency have for the discourse coherence of the whole essay. This SFL-informed literacy instruction is not just to provide students a useful tool for writing a powerful argumentative essay, but it also expands on the existing literature as a pedagogical guideline, a checklist for peer review and a rubric for assessment.

Introduction

The recent years has seen increasing emphasis on advancing students' academic literacy. To address this aspiration, educators and researchers have looked to different theoretical frameworks to guide these instructional practices. Systemic functional linguistics(SFL) theory is one of them. Functional approach is a model that informs national curriculum at a global level (such as The Australian Curriculum), and its applicability is most commonly seen in developing genre-based pedagogical approaches, register analysis and discourse analysis of texts.

Drawing from this literature, this paper uses field-tenor-mode framework as an analytic tool to help students produce and analyze argumentative writing and assist teachers to gauge the applicability of these instructional practices to an EAP context. It sets an analytic framework that examines the discourse markers that signified the continuum of field, mode and tenor which determines the quality of the text as a whole. This SFL-informed literacy instruction expands on the existing literature as a pedagogical guideline, a checklist for peer review and a rubric for assessment, as well as an implication for EAP educational settings.

Literature Review

The theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics has been applied in EFL language instruction for more than twenty years. What is central to the study of SFL's application into academic literacy are three directions-- genre-based pedagogy in designing and reflecting on academic literacy instruction [1], systemic functional linguistic approach to usage-based research and instruction [2], and language analysis in the framework of SFL[3].

During the past decade, the study of the language analysis in the framework of SFL is still gaining momentum recently as it deals with a more challenging "micro" problem in the writing process. Jenkins and Pico [4] studied two groups of students who learn English for different purposes and research on how these different purposes affect the use to which the SFL analyses will subsequently be put. Having the purpose-oriented mindset though, students still find the construction of the text very abstract. In response to this problem, Dr. Van Tran [5] made a very interesting analogy between the three variables in SFL framework and important elements in argumentative writing. This analogy provides students with a clearer instruction in lexical choices and text organization.

As a supplement, this study attempts to analyze a specific genre of writing—argumentative writing using the field-tenor-mode framework. The reason argumentative writing is chosen is that it requires the very core skills of academic literacy. It focuses on reasoned, logical argument and presents an impersonal stance of academic detachment.

Theoretical Framework

The theory to be applied in the analysis is Systemic Function Linguistics (SFL). A very significant perspective in SFL is to view discourse as a functional act: discourse is a medium to concrete things.

In order to accomplish something effectively, it's necessary to choose a certain register. Register can be defined as "manner of speaking or writing specific to a certain function, that is, characteristic of a certain domain of communication (or of an institution)" [6]

Register is made explicit via its three functional constituents: field, tenor, and mode. Field is an element of the experiential metafunction of a text. The field of a text tells which domain of experience the text is about: family life, religious observance, law enforcement, medicine, etc. Tenor is a component of the interpersonal metafunction of a text. Tenor tells what kind of person the author is and what the relationship is between different participants. Mode is an element of the textual metafunction of a text. The mode of a text tells about the method the text has been produced in [7].

These three variable changes with the communicative purpose. The consistency of these three variables plays a significant role constructing a discourse coherence.

Text Analysis

The text to be analyzed in this paper is a sample argumentative essay named *From Lecture to Conversation: Redefining What's "Fit to Print"*. It's selected from the textbook *A Writer's Reference with 2016 MLA Update* authored by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers who have spent 35 years teaching and researching nearly 4000 students across US in her attempts to applying this manual in writing instruction.

Field and Discourse Coherence

Field refers to the range of topics. Whether the topics stay focused and relevant determines if the discourse is consistent or not. To be more specific, to achieve the unity in discourse, all topics should be centered around the same thesis statement and logically interrelated as supportive sub points. In this particular text, two main aspects will be examined: the unity of lexical items and the development of topics.

Unity of Lexical Items. One of the ways to evaluate the unity of topic range is whether the lexical items are relevant to the topic. In the sample text, the topic is about news and journalism. As can be seen from the Table 1, news-related vocabulary is used very frequently in each paragraph and there is a clear sign of advancement as the topics develop.

Table 1. The vocabulary relating to the topic word “News” used in each paragraph

Paragraph	Word Lists
1	news story / newsworthy/“fit to print”/printed page/ worth covering/news consumption/ extensive coverage/ shift from print to online news/hold journalists accountable
2	journalism’s code of ethics/ print news reporters/ delivered stories/ editors (2) / readers (2) /print news media/reputation for objective reporting/print journalism/no further inquiry/ journalists/ News as a lecture/ more of a conversation/ “a stop sign” for readers/ online news (2) /Print news/ Participation from readership
3	online news/ print news/ built-in hyperlinks/ the roots of a story/ perspectives on a topic/ critical consumers of information/journalist’s handling/ original source/ readers/journalist’s claims
4	in print/ The International Center for Media and the Public Agenda/ news organizations (2) / journalism/ accountability leads to credibility/ news consumers/ critical news consumers/ news producers/ online discussion forums/ Citizen journalists / laptops/ cell phones/ digital camcorders/news producers/ video and audio recordings
5	unregulated news reporting online/ citizen journalists (3) /editorial oversight citizen reporting/ journalism/ journalistic standards/ pseudo news/traditional print news
6	critical news updates/ traditional journalists/ citizen journalists (2) / Pulitzer Prize/ online coverage/ Pulitzer Prize board/ <i>Online Journalism Review</i> / blog updates
7	Coverage/ news editors/“fit to print”

Development of Topics. The organization of argumentative essay is structured on sound logic reasoning, as the purpose of the argument essay is to reason with logic progression. Hence, the consistency of field is not only reflected by the unity in the topic range. It is also well illustrated when these lexical terms gradually develop in its complexity and richness as the discussion advances. As an example, the news vocabulary used in the Table 1 will be incorporated into a diagram as an illustration of author’s logical construction. It well showcases how essential language unity direct readers from one point to the next at paragraph or even passage level.

The following diagrams manifest how topics develop as the vocabulary enriches.

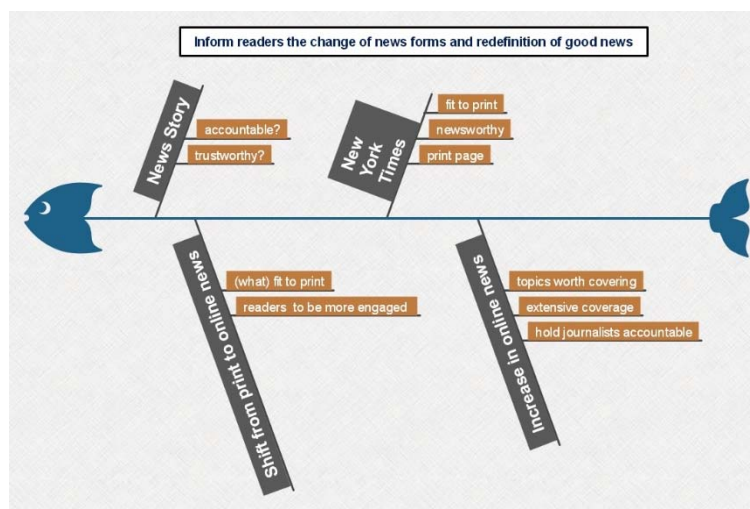


Figure 1. Illustrating words from paragraph 1

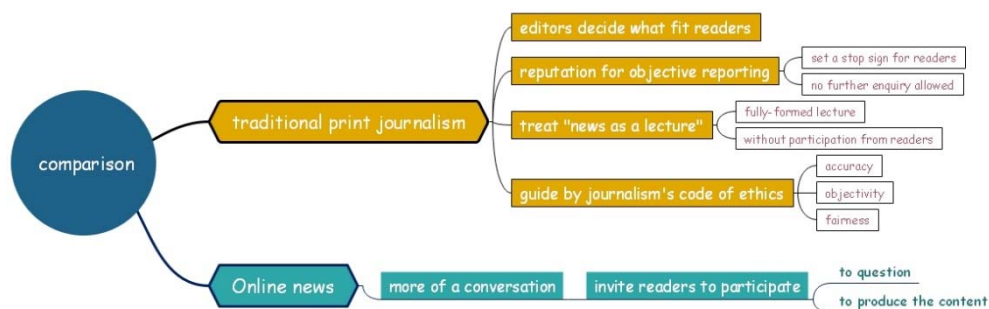


Figure 2. Illustrating words from paragraph 2

As can be seen in Figure 1, the writer designs a heuristic opening which directs readers to a thought-provoking issue: the comparison of traditional and new media. Then, it naturally develops to the second paragraph which points out the disadvantage of traditional news as a supportive reason to the author's claim. Obviously, there is a perceivable increasing level of complexity and richness in the vocabulary from paragraph one to paragraph two, which is also a proof of the continuity of discourse. Based on the abovementioned illustration, it's suggested that topic-related lexical terms should be extensively used in argumentative writing as an effective means to facilitate the topic development.

Tenor and Discourse Coherence

In systemic functional linguistics, the term tenor refers to the participants in a discourse, their relationships to each other, and their purposes[8]. Gregory [9] further differentiates between personal addressee relationship and functional addressee relationship, i.e., personal and functional tenor respectively. Specifically, personal tenor determines the level of formality of the language, whereas functional tenor refers to the purposes of written or oral communication. In argumentative essay, the purpose of language communication is to reinforce writer's points by reasoning with sound evidences, which can be achieved from the three aspects.

Impersonalization. In an informal writing, the writer speaks directly to the reader in a conversation style, whereas in a formal essay the writer should be silent presence behind the words. In an argumentative essay, experienced writers will generally minimize writer presence by means of impersonalization strategies and show full respect to readers without judging their position. For example, in the sentence "Surely you all see that Darwin's theory of evolution can't explain human nature", the writer's has presumed readers' attitude, which undermines the writer's identity of being impartial and objective.

The common impersonalization technique is to avoid the use of the following vocabulary:

- Personal Pronoun (such as "I", "we", "you")
- Directives (such as "Think about this", "Don't panic")
- Rhetorical questions (such as "What is the reason?")

In the sample text, there is no sign of the words mentioned above, which manifests a strong awareness of impersonalization in this argumentative essay.

Standing -- The Writers' Credibility, and Authority

- Is the source of the evidence reliable?

Quotations from authoritative publications or organizations will lend credibility to the author's claims. In the sample text, evidences are mainly direct quotation or paraphrase of comments from experts or prestigious organizations. For instance, Pulitzer Prize, the American awarding agency of the highest honor of journalism, acclaimed American citizens for relaying critical news updates in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a rapidly developing crisis.

Table 2. A sample list of quotations and their sources in the sample text

Source	Authority	Attitude statement
New York Times	American newspaper with worldwide influence and readership	"All the news that's fit to print,"
Dan Gillmor	founder of the Center for Citizen Media	argues that traditional print journalism treats "news as a lecture,"
Healy, Jack.	New York Times news editor	allows readers to check the journalist's handling of an original source

b. Writer's expertise on the topic

The author's identity was not mentioned in the text, and there is no evidence as a proof of writer's expertise in the field. However, judging from the extensiveness and relevance of the referencing materials, there is no doubt that the author has conducted an in-depth research on this topic. What's more, an inclusion of diversified views and abundant information on the topic enhances the readability of the essay and earns the writer a higher sense of credibility.

c. Is the author in a position to criticize or give praise?

Try to avoid using words that signified criticism or lecturing, such as "will have to", "can no longer afford", "should" and "must".

Stance

a. Attitude

Whether the author's biased or not can be analyzed by the frequency of using evaluating expression. Evaluating expression refers to author's statement of his own stance while stating facts. The frequency of using evaluating expression determines the relationship between participants in the discussion. The functional tenor of argumentative essay is to argue the views to gain consent from readers. Then, it's reasonable for the author to hold his own views and properly use evaluating expression to address the functional tenor. However, overuse of it seems intrusive to the readers who expect to communicate in an objective, fair and open functional tenor.

There are three commons stance to set up in an argumentative essay.

i. Express attitudes assertively

For example: "The government's behaviour was disgraceful." This direct expression suggests the writer is holding strong views and allows readers to take a side on this issue.

ii. Presuppose readers agree

For example: "After nine years of the government's betrayal,..." (Main argument follows). This statement has presumed that readers all agree to the writer's view and they are not in a position to oppose.

iii. Stimulate readers to agree

Example: "Even though Fred's father is very old, Fred only visits him once a year".

In this context, the author does not make a very aggressive gesture, but it's easy to conceive his value judgement. The phrase "even though ... only" is already sufficient in stimulating readers to recognize or even agree to author's stance. Compared with the previous two techniques, this one is more commonly used by English-speaking writers.

In this specific sample text, when referring to the opposing view, the writer uses some evaluating expression to support the opponents' criticism on online news: "the *unregulated* news reporting online". "*Unregulated*" indicates the writer also finds the counterclaim meaningful and factual. This impartial perspective demonstrates the writer's competence in critical reasoning.

b. Modality

The use of modality (such as "will, would, must may") creates space for readers to think and argue.

Mode and Discourse Coherence

Modes refers to the style of expression. The purpose of argumentative writings is to clarify logic and concepts of abstract thinking, so they are generally featured by formal language. As an example, the following sentences are selected from the target text and the words italicized are academic vocabulary. They convey rational thinking and critical perspectives, giving readers a sense of writer's focus on facts over opinion. The consistent use of academic vocabulary throughout the whole essay composes

an argumentative mode that contributes to the coherence in discourse.

...conduct their own *evaluation* of the *evidence* and *verify* the journalist's *claims*
enormous *contributions* of citizen journalists were *recognized*
Acknowledging that citizen reporting is more *immediate* and *experimental*
critics also *question* its *accuracy* and *accountability*...

Summary

Results from two aspects are presented through the text analysis.

Firstly, a continuous use of relevant lexical items of increasing complexity is expected to achieve the field consistency. Argumentative tenor, which is defined as critical and formal, requires quotations from credible sources, impersonal stance of academic detachment and unbiased attitudes that allow readers to think and argue freely. These traits are all featured by certain discourse markers. Argumentative mode can be characterized by a set of academic vocabulary. This high level of formality distinguishes the argumentative essay from the other genres.

Secondly, the register consistency effectively help writers achieve coherence in discourse. Subject matter(field), style(tenor) and medium of communication(mode) build on a foundation for the construction of an argument with proper language and text structure.

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