

Corpus analysis of argumentative versus explanatory discourse and its implications for writing task design by Laura Aull.

Existing corpus-based research of student writing reveals patterns across texts and contexts that we cannot otherwise detect, including how lexical and grammatical patterns interact and influence student success. Most of these studies take as their starting point the patterns in student writing, or the constructs of particular writing tasks, without aiming to return to inform the design of those tasks. This article suggests that an important step is exploring the interaction between textual patterns, on the one hand, and task design, on the other, so that moving forward, writing analytics and corpus research will help expose the relationship between the discursive profile of texts and their corresponding assignment parameters. To illustrate this approach, the article outlines findings from a context-informed corpus analysis of keywords in four projects by first-year college students: two argumentative essays, a visual analysis, and an annotated bibliography. The corpus findings include both lexical and grammatical keywords, in each of the four tasks as well as in the macro-genres of argumentative versus explanatory writing. Based on these findings, the article discusses the discursive practices prioritized in each task and each macro-genre. These key practices, including an emphasis on generalized, interpersonal, and persuasive discourse in argumentative essays versus more specified, informational, and elaborated discourse in explanatory writing, pose important questions for writing task design. The article closes by offering sociocognitive profiles for the macro-genres of argument and explanation that are accessible for practitioners and could be used to inform writing task design vis-à-vis a range of writing goals.