

Pedagogical Foray: Talking about other Texts and Discourses

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Instructors and students frequently talk about textbooks and student writing, especially as they pertain to class assignments. But often, speakers refer to other outside sources (such as journal articles, print and broadcast news, radio and TV programming). They bring information from these outside sources into the classroom to perform a variety of functions—for analysis, to enliven class discussions, to relate class work to the real world, to exert their authority or undermine another's, or to display their own knowledge. It is this second kind of referencing that is the focus of this foray.

Below you will find six extracts from MICASE, which will form the main basis for our analysis.

Task One. As you read them for the first time, just ask yourself (or your partner, if you have one) this question: Is the speaker of each extract a student or an instructor? What made you decide?

Excerpt 1: Mathematics

... last week, the New York Times ran an article about mathematics, with the title *Math emerges blinking into the glare of the pop world*. This article describes a new booming market for popular math books. Uh, it quotes an editorial claiming that the present time is a golden age for popularization of mathematics. It attributes a surge in interest in mathematics to the British mathematician Andrew Wiles, who made mathematics headlines around the world, uh for solving the most famous problem in the history of mathematics, Fermat's last theorem.

Excerpt 2: Social Science

I'm just going through **this article** here. Uh, it's called One Parent Households and Achievement: Economic and Behavioral Explanations of a Small Effect. And it's talking about, how students from one parent households have significantly lower grades, and test scores. And it also, discusses, how uh, it talks about lower income and like about mother headed households...

Excerpt 3: Mathematics

...Simon Singh, the one who wrote the book about Andrew Wiles' work, wrote an article for the English science magazine the New Scientist. But as it turns out most of the article was not about the most famous problem in mathematics or its prize. Instead, the article opens with the words "with the most notorious problem in mathematics now solved an even older puzzle is drawing the crowds." In that article Simon Singh argues that a worthy successor for Fermat's last theorem must match its charm and allure.

Excerpt 4: Biotechnology

Now, there's an article, they comment, that came out, in a journal called Trends in Plant Science that addresses some of these concerns, very directly, for G-M (Genetically Modified) crops. It's just a couple of pages. It's just an interesting article for those of you

who are a little bit interested in this. You don't really care about the plant part but are a little bit interested about some of this controversy surrounding the genetically modified crops. What is the public's perception? What is the scientific response to it? And I'd go into it but it's not that interesting to me which is unfortunate because as a scientist I can refute most of the complaints and the comments, but that's sort of not my purpose in this part of the lecture. If you're interested in that, that is here. So for instance, what are they doing about antibiotic resistance in plants? And is that really a problem? If you eat a plant that has an antibiotic resistance marker are you gonna become resistant to that antibiotic? Or is your intestinal flora? The simple answer is No you're not, and no your intestinal flora is not either, and it explains all about it in here. It does tend to be, it's rude to say, hysteria, and it's also rude to say ignorance but it's a little bit of both. And, this is actually just a nice very general comment, and commentary showing some of the studies that are being done. What it also does is it's very honest about saying, you know, scientists didn't really think about invasiveness in natural habitats. What are these transgenes doing? We didn't really think when they first started developing these, are we gonna be impacting nontarget organisms? And so it does a nice job of saying now what they're looking at and what they're finding in some of these studies.... It turns out that actually China is the country that has the largest areas of transgenic crops. In fact, in this one article that I looked at they predicted that by the year two thousand, seventy percent of the total tobacco being cultivated in China would be transgenic ...

Excerpt 5: Journalism

Anybody happen to watch Nightline last night? They mentioned that photograph last night. They did a story about privacy in England and hidden cameras. In fact the police wanna have cameras posted all over the place. And this piece last night on Nightline specifically mentioned that photograph as an example of police saying there's a value to having cameras out there.

Excerpt 6: Journalism

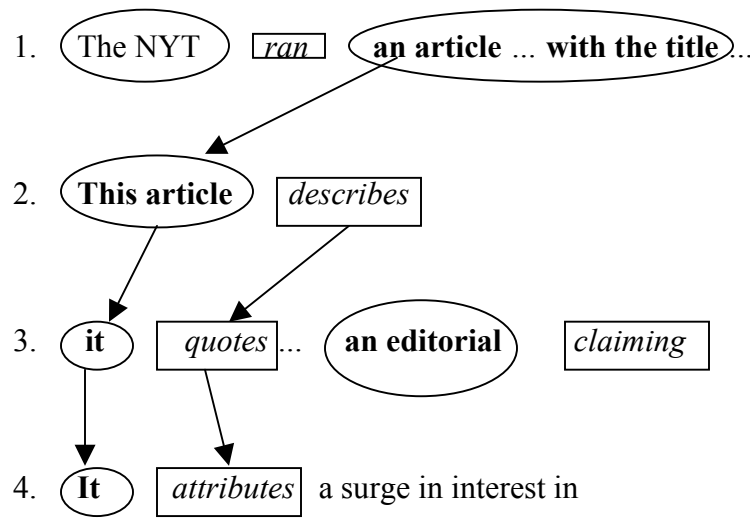
Uh, well the article that I found over the weekend was about the American Society of Newspaper Editors, with support of the Society of Professional Journalists trying to get copies of the autopsy photos of race car driver Dale Earnhardt's body after he after he was killed in a stock car race at the Daytona 500. Part of the background of the story is the other article that I passed out, which talks about uh Teresa Earnhardt's reaction just a few days after the race where she said that she wanted the medical examiner's records to remain confidential. Of course there's the aspect, in photo journalism, of public harm and of course granting public access to autopsy photographs. It turns out that Florida has a pretty liberal law regarding autopsy photographs if they're not part of the active criminal investigation. So therefore, the newspaper editors collectively are going after these documents. The reason is is they want to hire an independent investigator to determine if there was another reason why he died...

Task Two. Which of the excerpts strikes you as most similar to written discourse? Which seem more conversational? Why?

Task Three. Re-read the extracts and try and decide which of the following categories best apply to each. Any extract might be seen as fulfilling more than one category.

- a) The speaker is demonstrating that he or she is right up to date?
- b) The speaker is trying to link the academic and non-academic worlds in some way?
- c) The speaker is questioning the authority of the source under discussion?
- d) The speaker is doing something that we haven't mentioned and that is:

Let us now consider how Speaker 1 proceeds. We can see this from a “skeletal” version:



Notice these sequences: **an article** → **this article** → **it** → **it**

describes → *quotes* → *attributes*

Note that the circled sequence (from indefinite noun “an” to “it”) is fairly standard; the boxed choice of verbs is much more flexible.

Task Four. Now do a similar “skeletal” analysis of two of the other extracts.

Task Five. Now prepare your own extract based on a source you know. You may hold your source in your hand, but you should try and speak without notes. Aim for a length similar to that of Excerpt 1.

COMMENTARY

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Task One.

1. Instructor
2. Student
3. Instructor
4. Instructor
5. Instructor (But this excerpt sounds as though a student could have spoken it.)
6. Student (Spoken by a senior undergraduate but sounds like instructor. Could this be attributed to the fact that senior undergraduates are encouraged/expected to take on a more senior role in academic interactions as they advance in their college careers?)

As you have seen, these categorizations are not so readily apparent. Some students sound more professorial than the instructors and vice versa.

Task Two. In order from most prose-like to most conversational, our scale would go something like: 3, 1, 6, 4, 5, 2. But this is certainly open to discussion.

Task Three

- a) 1, 4, and 5 demonstrate that the speaker is right up to date.
- b) 1, 4, and 5 link the academic and non-academic.
- c) 4, and possibly 3?, seem to question the authority of the source.
- d) We're open to all observations.

Task Four. Skeletal analyses might look something like the following:

- Excerpt 2: this article here, it, it, it, it
it's called, it's talking about, discusses, talks about, and like about
- Excerpt 3: Simon Singh, an article, the article, the article, that article
was not about, opens with, argues that
- Excerpt 4: an article, it, it, an interesting article, it, it, this, it, it,
this one article
they comment, addresses, tends to be, is a nice..., it's very honest about saying, does a nice job of saying, they predicted
- Excerpt 5: Nightline, they, a story, this piece
mentioned, did a story about, specifically mentioned
- Excerpt 6: the article, the other article
was about, talks about

Task Five. No commentary possible.