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Academic Communications and the Graduate Student

John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition that many graduate students, especially those in Ph.D. programs, need some kind of structured assistance with their writing. At the University of Michigan, for example, the graduate school has recently initiated a series of annual workshops on this topic. We know from P. A. Prior's (1998) rich studies of graduate seminars how complex the writing processes for graduate students can be, and all of us involved in graduate education are aware that doctoral students are now expected to assemble some kind of publication list before they graduate. Not surprisingly, the first population targeted for assistance consisted of nonnative speakers of English (Casanave and Hubbard 1992), and there have been important developments over the decade in this area (e.g., Dong 1998).

For several years now, the University of Michigan's English Language Institute has been offering a linked sequence of two advanced writing courses ("Research Paper Writing" and "Dissertation and Proposal Writing") for nonnative speakers from across the university. These courses are voluntary, attract graduate credit, and are supported by individual consultancies. Major course components include the conference abstract, the conference poster, the literature review, and the dissertation abstract. There are also two units that deal with the "interstitial" genres that undergird research writing processes: requests, reminders, submission letters, CVs, applications, recommendation letters, and the like. Here is an extract from Swales and Feak 2000 on reminders:

Reminders and Responses

It happens to all of us that some of our best-crafted and most reasonable requests are met with silence. If the matter is still important, we may now need to send a reminder, typically nowadays by e-mail. How would you characterize the following approaches? Which one do you prefer and why? Are there ways in which your preferred choice could be further improved?

Reminder A

Dear Professor Wilson

You may remember that several weeks ago I messaged asking if you could write a recommendation for me in support of my application for a Doctoral Fellowship. You may also recall that you agreed to do this. According to the graduate secretary, the department has yet (of yesterday) to receive a letter from you. I am wondering therefore if I could remind you about this? Of course please ignore this message if you have already written.

Reminder B

Dear Professor Wilson

I am reposting my request for a letter (April 24, 1999) in case you have overlooked it. I know how busy you are at this time of year, but I would be very grateful if you could manage something.

Reminder C

Dear Professor Wilson

Completed applications for next year's Doctoral Fellowships are due at the central administration by 4 P.M. this Friday. My dossier is complete except for the letter you agreed to write for me some weeks ago. It is now too late for me to approach another professor about a letter. Can I therefore ask you to do this by noon on Friday? Without a complete dossier, my application will be automatically rejected and my academic future compromised. I would be very willing to collect a sealed letter from your department and hand-carry it across campus. If you need to contact me in the next 24 hours I can be most easily reached at 555-5555.

A Response to Reminders A, B, and C

The nature of the difficulty of reminder messages is not so straightforward. On one level, there is the problem of power relations between professors and graduate students, leading to uncertainty about their relationships (Taylor and Holberg 1999). Indeed, relationships can be quite complex. As one of our students stated, "Some days a professor is my boss, another day he is my colleague, and then on another day he is my mentor and advisor. And when I think of myself, some days I think I am a colleague and other days I think I am just a person my advisor uses to get some work done. But I always know that I am not equal." This "paradoxical positioning" (Taylor and Holberg 1999) places an extra linguistic burden on many of our nonnative speakers, who want to take their position into consideration when they write but are not sure what their position is and have difficulty putting their knowledge of English grammar into effective use. On this level, we can see that challenges can arise in a number of areas, such as hedging (including modal use), aspect (simple present or present progressive), and conditional expressions.

Reactions to the three reminders can be interestingly varied. Some students, especially those who feel they have been “let down” by faculty in the past, may opt for the risky “pressure tactics” of C as the only strategy likely to get the job done. Fewer support the little nudge offered in B. Most choose A. They like its “escape clause” close and its “more in sorrow than in anger” tone. It is usually agreed, however, that its second sentence is more “in your face” than it needs to be. A typical revision would be: “You may remember that several weeks ago you agreed to write a recommendation for me in support of my application for a Doctoral Fellowship.”

We hope this small extract illustrates our aspirations to offer support courses containing activities that are of practical help, that can lead to lively discussion, and that can appeal to participants who may come from any of the twenty-one constituent schools and colleges on the Ann Arbor campus. In fact, we have come to believe that the heterogeneous nature of our classes is actually a considerable advantage, largely because all participants quickly come to realize that what they have most in common is a concern with the rhetorical and linguistic features of research English as expressed through its major genres. Unlike disciplinary classes, there is little competition among members, and issues of accuracy of content thankfully rarely arise.