
The Genres of Chi Omega: An Activity Analysis

VICTORIA MARRO

Produced in Elizabeth Wardle's Fall 2011 ENC1102

Introduction

Sororities have existed for over 100 years and have maintained their values even as time passes and chapters become farther apart. One way these organizations have been able to keep these traditions is through the use of various genres. According to the work of writing researchers such as Amy Devitt, genres are flexible responses to fit the needs of a discourse community or social setting. A discourse community is a group with agreed upon goals, communication, the use of genres, feedback, a threshold level of membership and specified language (Johns). Researchers Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff have looked at the way that genres serve the needs of juries, doctors' offices, and classrooms. According to these researchers, "genre study allows students and researchers to recognize how 'lived textuality' plays a role in the lived experience of a group" (Bawarshi, Devitt, and Reiff 542).

One community that plays a big part in my life and in the lives of 300,000 other women is my sorority, Chi Omega. Usually, research done on Greek life involves eating disorders and problems with hazing, but such issues should not define these organizations. Not enough research has been done on the complex genre systems, or genre sets, used by sororities and fraternities. A genre set, as defined by Charles Bazerman, is a group of several genres that predictably recur inside a domain-specified community (Honig 91). A genre system, as defined by Amy Devitt, is a "set of genres interacting to achieve an overarching function within an activity system" (Bawarshi and Reiff 87). Genre sets and systems are important with regard to social action and interact to further the purposes of a group. By analyzing these, social roles and progress become much clearer within activity systems: "A genre system includes genres from multiple genre sets, over time, and can involve the interaction of users with different levels of expertise and authority, who may not all have equal knowledge of or access to all" (Bawarshi and Reiff 88). In an organization as large as Chi Omega, this is incredibly important because the levels of authority and expertise of members varies so greatly. Bazerman has previously looked at the use of genre systems in classrooms and in the US patent application process (Bawarshi and Reiff 88). In this paper, I will look at the genres used within Chi Omega and how the use of genre systems help the 173 collegiate chapters of Chi Omega function both independently and together as one activity system. For the purposes of this paper, an activity system functions in a similar fashion to a discourse community, with laid out purposes, tools, rules, subject, community and a division of labor. This will be further explained in my discussion. I will look at the different genres that are used, as well as the different ways that the same genre may be used by different chapters, examining the ways that the same tool can serve completely different purposes for different chapters. I will specifically look at the genres we use in my chapter today, and how these genres are utilized to further the goals of Chi Omega.

Methods

I interviewed two sisters in other Chi Omega chapters, including Emily, an active sister in the Eta Delta chapter at the University of Florida and Summer, an active sister of the Psi Kappa chapter at Clemson University. Their names have been changed. These sisters were asked what technologies their executive boards used to communicate with them; about genres used by chapters such as a weekly newsletter, Billhighway and the GIN system; and their opinion on the effectiveness of said genres. These sisters were asked their opinions on the importance of writing and ritual to Chi Omega nationally, and about the national magazine, *The Eleusis*.

An interview was also conducted with Brittany, an alum from the Psi Mu chapter of Chi Omega at the University of Central Florida. Her name has been changed as well. She was asked how the executive board communicated with the sisters during her time in the chapter, about a weekly newsletter, the GIN system, and her opinion on the effectiveness of these genres. She was asked about her involvement in an alumnae chapter and the genres that were used within that chapter. She was also asked about the national magazine, *The Eleusis*.

The Psi Mu chapter secretary, Allison, was interviewed about the writing she does for the chapter and the way she became versed in these genres. She was asked her opinion on the effectiveness of the GIN system and the problems with this system. Other questions included her opinions on the importance of writing to the national organization and whether or not she reads *The Eleusis*.

I also interviewed Psi Mu chapter president, Nicole. Nicole was asked about how the GIN system came into effect and what methods of communication were used prior to this system. She was asked about the ritual text, but at the request of the chapter secretary, these responses will not be included. Like in all of the other interviews, she was asked if she read *The Eleusis*. As the chapter president, she was asked about her communication with other chapters and with nationals, and her opinion on the importance of writing and written communication to the organization as a whole.

Over twenty genres were collected and analyzed including the GIN system, *The Eleusis*, the weekly newsletter, announcements, files and others. The importance of genres that could not be accessed, such as the written rituals and the Book of Rules, were analyzed as well. Activity triangles were constructed for Chi Omega as a national organization, as well as for individual chapters and genres. Database searches were conducted and previous research was synthesized to support findings.

Activity triangles were constructed to analyze the activity systems, Chi Omega nationally, the Psi Mu, Psi Kappa and Eta Delta chapters, and the GIN system. Activity theory, which says that people write as part of an activity system, can be displayed in a triangle, with tools at the top, subject on the middle left, object on the middle right, rules in the lower left, the community in the lower middle, and division of labor in the lower right-hand corner. A series of arrows inside the triangle shows how each portion is connected to the others (see Figure 1 below).

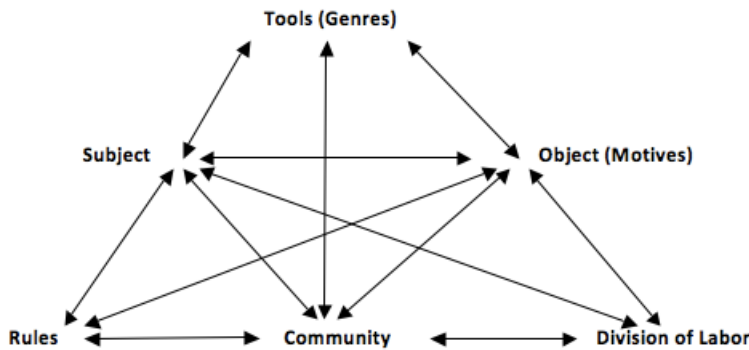


Figure 1 Organization of an Activity System

Results and Discussion

Through activity analysis, I found that the chapters of Chi Omega all write in different genres; however, all of the chapters share the same goals, which are laid out in the mission statement, a shared genre. I found that this mission statement is broken up into six parts, and each of those has a director, which makes up the cardinal cabinet. Each director works with a specific genre set, and these together make up a genre system. In the Psi Mu chapter, one super-genre encompasses all of these genres sets and works as a genre system within that genre.

Chi Omega sorority was founded in 1895 by Dr. Charles Richardson, Ina May Boles, Jean Vincenheller, Jobelle Holcombe, and Alice Simonds. Chi Omega has initiated over 300,000 members and has 173 collegiate chapters. The tools used by Chi Omega nationally are the written rituals, established by Dr. Charles Richardson when the sorority was founded; the Book of Rules, which lists all rules for members; the Chi Omega Symphony and mission statement, which summarize the organization's purposes; the chapter rosters; ChiOmega.com; and *The Eleusis*, the national magazine. In a letter

Through activity analysis, I found that the chapters of Chi Omega all write in different genres; however, all of the chapters share the same goals, which are laid out in the mission statement, a shared genre.

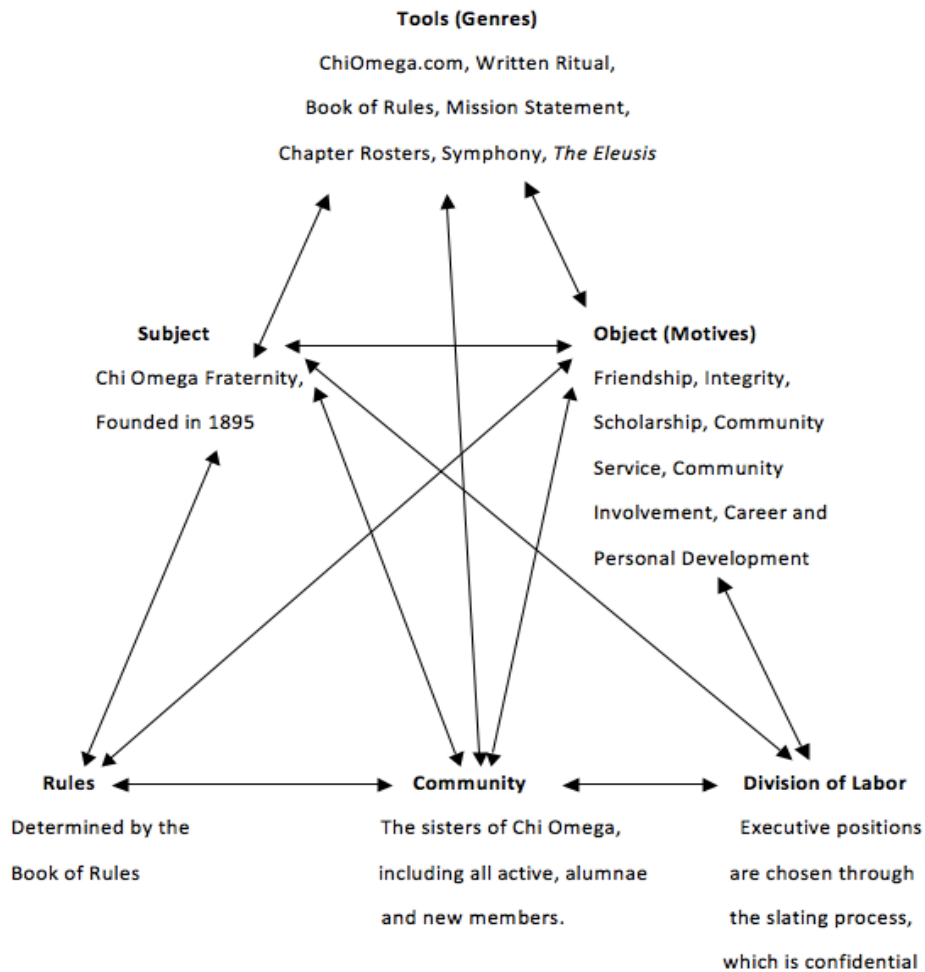


Figure 2 Organization of Chi Omega nationally

from the national president that came with the latest issue of *The Eleusis*, she states the purpose of the magazine is “to connect our members to the national organization by sharing experiences, spotlighting successes, and providing tools for the development of our members” (Fulkerson). The written ritual provides the lexis, or specialized language, of the discourse community. The rituals are confidential and therefore will not be further explained. The motives or objects of the activity system are to promote friendship, integrity, scholarship, community service, involvement in the community and career and personal development. These purposes make up the mission statement of Chi Omega. The rules are determined by the Book of Rules and, in individual chapters, the bylaws. The community is all of the sisters and new members of Chi Omega in all of the chapters, both collegiate and alumni. The division of labor in each chapter is determined by the slating process, in which sisters nominate other sisters for a position, other sisters give their input, and then another sister is nominated for that position as well. All of the input is recorded along with all of the sisters nominated for positions and at the end of the day the executive board is chosen based on that information. The idea of slating is that the position seeks the woman, not the other way around. Those who tell people they would like to be slated are ineligible to hold an executive position (see Figure 2). This activity system can be applied to each of the 173 collegiate chapters, and although in most cases more genres are used as well, it keeps all of the chapters in line with the same values and purposes.

Using Different Tools to Achieve the Same Motives

Chi Omega is such a large organization that it would be incredibly difficult to use only a few genres and have every chapter using the same genres. According to Carolyn Miller, the amount of genres used by a group is dependent on how complex and diverse the group is (Devitt 575). This statement in itself shows the complexity and diversity of Chi Omega, and the reasoning behind how different chapters use different genres to mediate the same goals. In UCF’s Psi Mu chapter (see

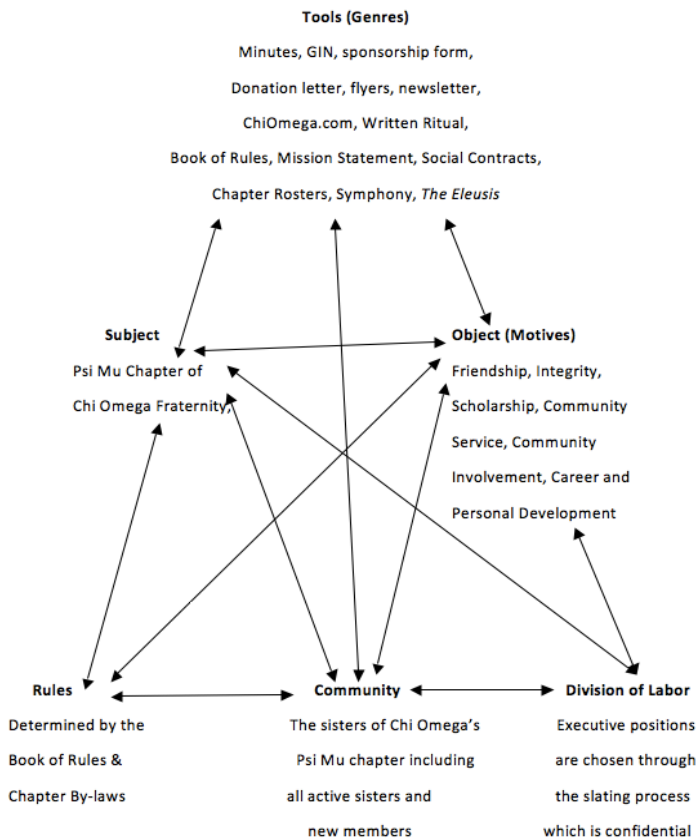


Figure 3 Psi Mu Chapter of Chi Omega

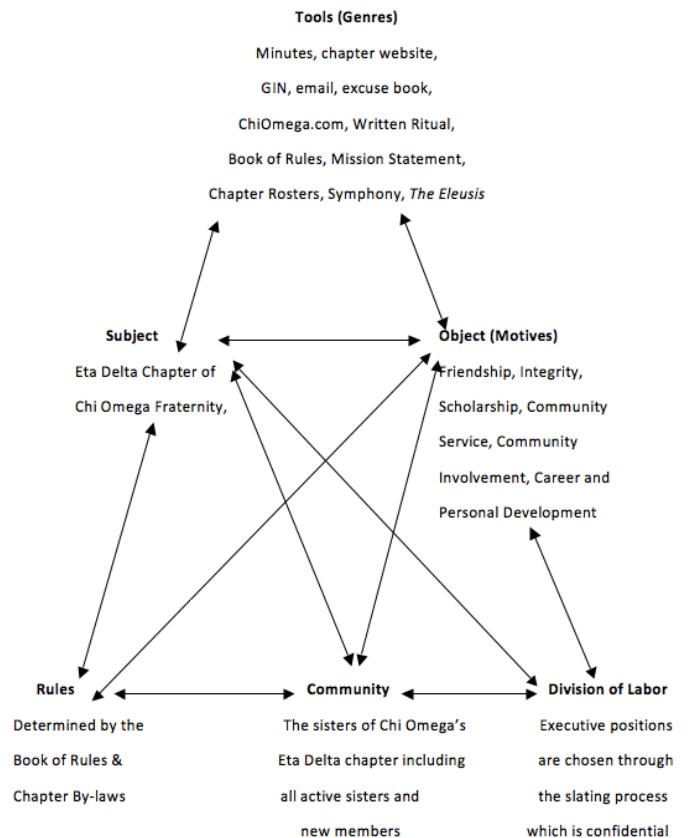


Figure 4 Eta Delta Chapter of Chi Omega

Figure 3) alone, there are over twenty genres, with more being added all the time. These genres function together as a genre system to make the organization work. Some of these genres have been used since the sorority's founding in 1895 and others have come into being much more recently in response to situations in which the genres being used were not working efficiently. For example, one new genre used is the GIN system, which can be looked as a genre system within itself. The Eta Delta chapter also uses the GIN system (see Figure 4). The GIN system as a genre will be looked at in more detail later.

In Brittany's interview, she explained to me that when she was in the chapter, they had a website, but nothing like the GIN system. She told me that the executive board would rarely post to the chapter website because they did not believe it was secure. Announcements were sent through mass emails. Summer told me that her chapter does not use the GIN system and, like Brittany's chapter, the executive board rarely uses the chapter website. The Psi Kappa (see Figure 5) chapter uses Survey Monkeys, an online type of questionnaire, in the way that the Psi Mu chapter uses the question function on the GIN system. This shows how different genres are able to mediate the same goal for different chapters. As was the case when Brittany was a sister, Summer's chapter sends mass emails for announcements.

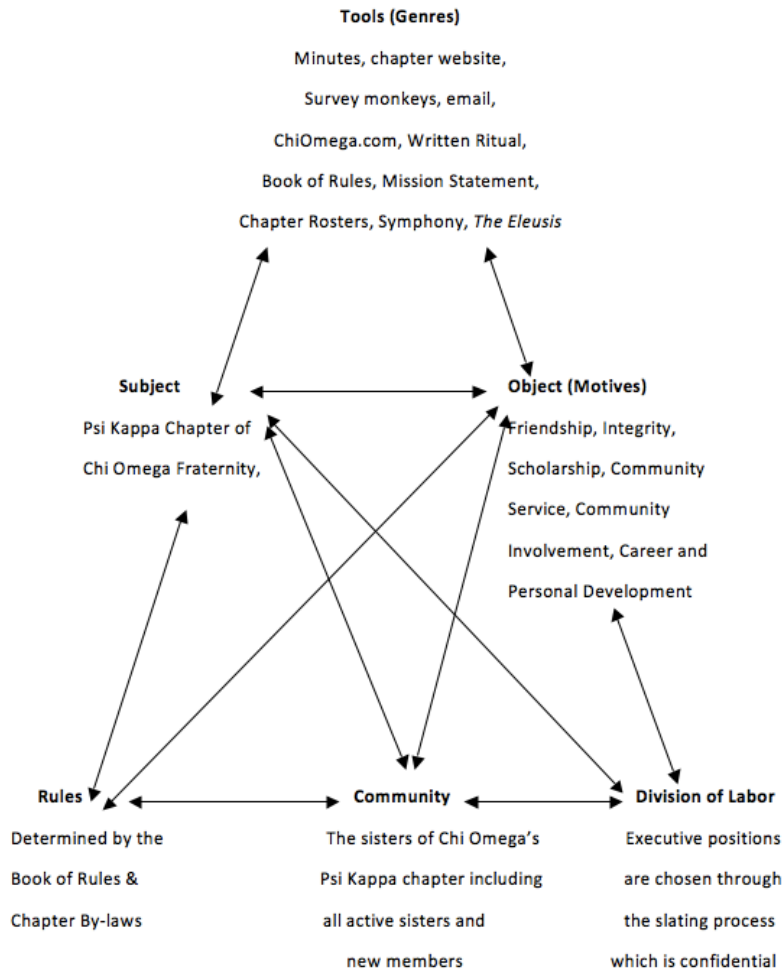


Figure 5 Psi Kappa Chapter of Chi Omega

A Genre System within a Genre

The activity triangle laid out simply for the GIN system (see Figure 6) shows that even inside one genre, an entire genre system can be taking place. The Psi Mu chapter's GIN system uses announcements, questions, files, and an event calendar. These tools help the chapter to accomplish its goals. The system even categorizes the information posted based on the urgency indicated by the person posting. If the message should be read immediately, it is posted on the wall and a text message is sent to all the sisters. If it should be read soon, an email is sent and it is posted on the wall. If it just needs to be read before the next chapter meeting, it is only posted on the wall.

The GIN system contains questions regarding purchasing merchandise and announcements about money that is due, which then function as a genre set with BillHighway.com, a website through which sisters pay their dues, fees, and also pay for any merchandise they order from the chapter. This genre set is particularly important because the chapter would not be able to accomplish its goals without a budget. Another genre set is formed by the GIN questions and announcements regarding volunteer events and the spreadsheet that keeps track of the community service hours, which is posted on the GIN system as a file. This genre set is mediated by the director of community service. Another genre set is made up by the questions, announcements and calendar posts regarding study sessions, a goal GPA, and the spreadsheet posted with all of the scholarship points. This set is mediated by the vice-president, who also serves as the scholarship chair. A question is posted weekly about how often sisters work out. This question, along with links posted to internships and gym classes, makes up the genre set used by the direct of career and personal development. GIN questions and announcements posted about socials function in a genre set with social contracts, mediated by the director of friendship and social. The announcements on GIN as well as in the weekly newsletter about sisterhood events function with the attendance questions in the genre set mediated by the direct of sisterhood and personnel. The campus activities director mediates a genre set which includes interest questions about the events put on by other organizations, as well as files and announcements about these events. All of these genre sets together make the genre system within the GIN system.

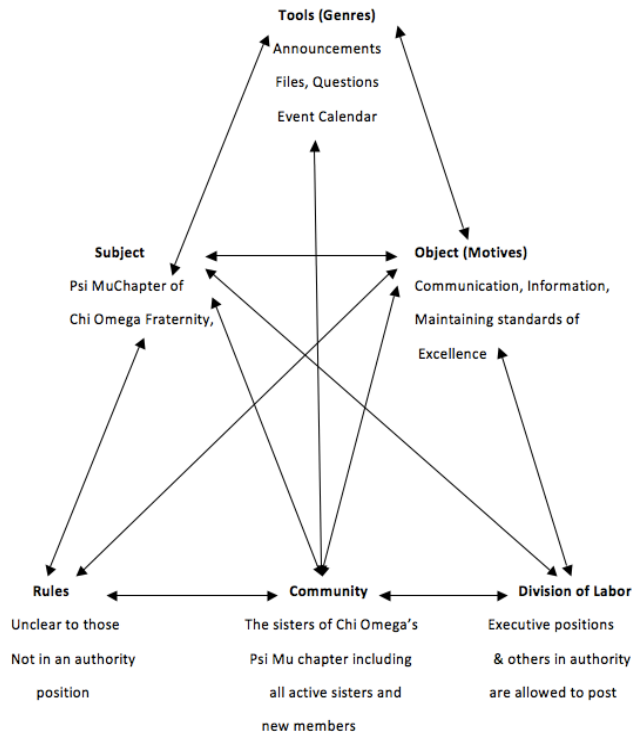


Figure 6 The Psi Mu Chapter of Chi Omega's GIN System

The Psi Mu chapter began using the GIN system in the spring of 2009. Prior to this system, the chapter was contacted through emails and signup sheets in chapter. Consistent with activity theory, which “illuminates the affordances offered to us by technology” (Levine), the GIN system was found to be a better alternative. By utilizing the GIN system, the chapter was able to keep everything organized and in one place. This genre came into being to “respond appropriately to situations that writers encounter repeatedly” (Devitt 576). The writers of Chi Omega, meaning the sisters in positions of authority, found a new genre that could work more efficiently in the situations they constantly found themselves in, such as how to announce a meeting to the entire chapter, and how to remind sisters to pay their dues. The GIN system provides a means of feedback and communication, two of the defining characteristics of a discourse community (Johns).

Some Final Thoughts

In the words of Amy Devitt, “all genres exist through and depend on human action” (Bawarshi, Devitt and Reiff 548). The genres I described in the previous paragraphs are able to further the goals of the chapter because they are well maintained. The chapter secretary checks every post on the GIN system to make sure they are appropriate and the treasurer constantly checks BillHighway to make sure sisters have paid the money they owe to the chapter. Without this maintenance, these genres would not be what they are. For example, I was once shown a fraternity’s GIN system. The layout of the website was the same. There was a section for files, announcements, questions, and a calendar; however, where on the Chi Omega GIN system these sections would have many links, their GIN system was quite empty. The brother showing me this GIN system told me that nobody ever used the website and he rarely checked it. The only thing that was really used on this fraternity’s GIN system was the list of phone numbers and emails for the brothers. Their announcements were sent out in mass emails and text messages, and their questions were asked in chapter, answers were recorded after a show of hands. This shows how the same tool can serve completely different purposes for different chapters. Most genres are fluid rather than rigid, and can be modified to fit the situation (Devitt 579).

Without various genres, large organizations such as Chi Omega would not be able to function the way that they do.

As I said earlier, one of the six characteristics of a discourse community is a threshold level of membership (Johns). In Chi Omega, members go through a recruitment process specific to their university and are given a bid. Upon acceptance of this bid, they become new members. In order “to be successfully enculturated into new communities of practice or activity systems... [one] must learn and conform to the conventions, codes and genres of those communities” (Wardle). As a new member, things such as the GIN system and the other genres used by the chapter can be quite confusing, and generally require observation before using them regularly. In her research, Devitt acknowledges that “knowing the genre..means knowing such things as appropriate subject matter, level of detail, tone and approach as well as the usual layout and organization” (Devitt 577). This explains the need for observation when becoming enculturated into a community, to learn things such as tone, level of detail, approach and subject matter.

Without various genres, large organizations such as Chi Omega would not be able to function the way that they do. There is a different genre for everything: a spreadsheet to keep track of volunteer hours, a GIN system for questions and announcements, formal letters for donations, and most importantly, the written ritual that has been used to initiate over 300,000 Chi Omega sisters. Having this genre connects each sister to all of the others, even if they’ve never met. Similar genres mediate the activity of Chi Omega chapters everywhere so that they are able to work together as a whole.

Works Cited

- Bawarshi, Anis, Amy J. Devitt, and Mary Jo Reiff. "Materiality and Genre in the Study of Discourse Communities." *College English* 65 (2003): 541-58. EBSCOhost. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.
- Bawarshi, Anis S., and Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. Ed. Charles Bazerman. West Lafayette: Parlor, 2010. Print.
- Berkenkotter, Carol, and Thomas N. Huckin. "Rethinking Genre from a Sociocognitive Perspective." *Written Communication* 10 (1993): 475-509. EBSCOhost. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.
- "Quick Facts about Chi Omega." *Chi Omega*. Chi Omega. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.
- Devitt, Amy. "Generalizing About Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept." *College Composition and Communication* 44.4 (1993): 573-86. Eric EBSCOhost. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.
- Fulkerson, Letitia. Letter to Chi Omega Parents. Oct. 2011. MS. 3395 Players Club Parkway, Memphis, TN.
- Honig, Sheryl. "What Do Children Write in Science? A Study of the Genre Set in a Primary Science Classroom." *Written Communication* 27.1 (2010): 87-119. EBSCOhost. Web. 7 Nov. 2011.
- "Interview of Psi Mu Chapter President." E-mail interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
- "Interview of Psi Mu Chapter Secretary." E-mail interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
- "Interview of Psi Kappa sister." E-mail interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
- "Interview of Eta Delta sister." E-mail interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
- "Interview of Psi Mu sister alum." E-mail interview. 24 Oct. 2011.
- Johns, Ann M. "Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice: Membership, Conflict, and Diversity." *Text, Role, and Context: Developing Academic Literacies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 51-70. Print.
- Levine, Thomas H. "Tools for the Study and Design of Collaborative Teacher Learning: the Affordances of Different Conceptions of Teacher Community and Activity Theory." *Teacher Education Quarterly* 37.1 (2010): 109. Print.
- Wardle, Elizabeth. "Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces." *Enculturation* 5.2 (2004): n. pag. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.

Victoria Marro

Victoria Marro is a Junior in the Class of 2014 studying Microbiology & Molecular Biology on the Pre-professional track at the University of Central Florida. She is a member of the Burnett Honors College, a sister of Chi Omega Fraternity, and a Mentor Writing Consultant at the University Writing Center. She hopes to go into medicine, specializing in pediatric oncology. When not in school, she lives in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida with her parents and two brothers. She is currently involved in a project to study the transfer of writing-related knowledge with Dr. Elizabeth Wardle.