
Navigating Authority in Coursework and Life: An Unofficial Guide for Fellow Students

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*D*ear Students,

This guide attempts to give you the info you will maybe use sometimes in a class here or there to let the teacher know you read the book and came to most of the classes. You could get a C probably if you read this, or just continue to do what you did in high school, that should be fine.

What is wrong about that opening remark, or maybe a better question, would you ever take the time to read or pay attention to something that provides mediocre gain, or more accurately, no change from what you already do and know? The answer is no—it will always be no. There is a reason that high school ends and that college or careers progress out of dedication and intensive focus in particular subjects, or passions, or values. And there must be structures in place to ensure that that focus elevates the field or the individuals that make up our society. So let's start again:

Dear Students,

This guide contains the information you will need to know about writing with authority in college coursework. It will provide you with the understanding of what authority means under this context, what the goals and objectives of authority accomplish, explain the core concepts or ways to create authority, and offer examples of students who used authority to their advantage, and the consequences for those who chose to ignore or deny their own use of authority. I will provide you with practical applications to highlight these main aspects on authority, using relatable examples for you to explore within your own mind what authority can and should mean for you in college and beyond. I will integrate ideas and concepts from respected professionals within the fields of rhetoric, linguistics, and education to substantiate my own ideals and opinions of what writing with authority means, with the purpose of encouraging you to do the same.

Where does authority exist, and how does knowledge affect authority?

Imagine yourself in a group setting where you overhear a conversation that interests you or can benefit you in the future. You do not know who the individuals are within the conversation, and some of what they speak of is unfamiliar to what you have understood from your past experiences.

You attempt to join the conversation, but both you and the others soon recognize you do not really know what you're talking about, so you shy away humiliated as they snidely remark on your ignorance.

Now imagine yourself in the setting of a college course, where you do not know what is expected of you to fulfill the requirements of what would be deemed an "A" grade. You foolishly have ignored the suggestions or provisions provided by the professor, and you were unaware that it is acceptable and encouraged that you seek feedback and contributions from fellow students. You receive a grade that is lower than what you know you are capable of.

Finally, imagine yourself in a position within a company you respect, one that you are most fortunate to have been employed with. You again underestimate the expectations of the position, of the company, of the desired outcomes of your own work and efforts. You fail. You are fired.

What do all of these examples have in common? You have not established or used authority appropriately. You have not considered the situational factors that play into each of these instances. What should you have done at the onset of each of these situations? You should have been asking yourself different questions altogether. You will always learn more if you decide that *what* really isn't the question you should be asking; it is the *why* and *how* that lead to greater understanding, to change and transformations. For the purpose of exposure and to establish a base point for your own progressive thought, we must begin with *what*. High school instruction and coursework is great at *what*—the concrete, the definite, the *domain knowledge*, or knowledge that is specific to a particular subject area or field, such as the memorization of all 206 bones in the human body you needed to know within Anatomy class, or the numerous dates you had to remember for United States History class. Domain knowledge, though it does change incrementally within any given field as new discoveries are made, is tangible—you will see it written in the form of facts and figures and it will be common to and prerequisite to all within that subject or field.

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Contrastingly, *rhetorical knowledge* is knowledge of the situation you find yourself within whenever you engage in a conversation or communication with other persons, from the slightest exchange between friends to speaking in front of a lecture hall full of your peers for a speech course. When speaking to the close friend about where to have dinner together, because of your past experiences with her or him, you are aware that discussing a restaurant he or she may not be able to afford would not be helpful in reaching a decision, so you do not even bring it up. Your rhetorical knowledge of your friend's financial situation causes you to act accordingly. In the speech course situation, you would consider the factors that would make you successful in the exchange as well—the *why* and *how*. Why have you been given this assignment? Why is public speaking important? How can you deliver the best possible speech to this particular audience? How does your position as a student speaker affect your message? And how can you use domain knowledge (the subject being discussed) to relate to the professor and your peers that you understand what the assignment functions as (rhetorical knowledge)? So why do domain knowledge and rhetorical knowledge matter? They facilitate your ability to have and use authority. So let's begin there.

What is authority in writing in college coursework, and what agents facilitate authority?

Authority under this context is the ability to use your knowledge within a subject matter (domain knowledge) to communicate your own position or claims to others in a manner so that it becomes part of the continued conversation regarding that subject matter. It may be contested or accepted, but it must be significant in power and scope, dependent upon the person or situation; it has substance. Authority is highly dependent on the *discourse community*, the individuals that make up a collective group who have in common goals, which may be communicated through agreed upon channels to share knowledge as well as critique discrepancies. Similar to a hierarchical chain of authority, there exists novices and experts, both serving their individual purposes to support any given discourse community. The former provides the legwork, adhering to and perpetuating the conventions used to achieve the community's shared goals. The latter provides the knowledge and know-how, the history of and the directional lead for change, should it be deemed necessary—it will always be necessary.

So what are conventions? *Conventions* are constructs of human design that facilitate effective communications. They are agreed upon ways of accomplishing shared goals, and they exist in varying degrees of formality; every discourse community exemplifies and controls its own unique set of conventions. Conventions range from the established abbreviated terms used within a group of friends to express shared meanings in text messages (lol, brb, btw, and the ever annoying # (hashtag)) to the format required to submit a document in a college course (Microsoft Word or Google Doc; MLA or APA) to the frequency of budget meetings to reach bi-quarterly quotas in the finance department. Conventions are used as shortcuts or as a means of communicating through systems that have been established in the past with enough success to garner further use. These systems do not and have never existed in the natural realm of planet Earth; we have made them up to serve the purposes we need them to. Further, *genres* have been created as specific or standard types of texts or communicative instruments with general commonalities and a recognizable identity. Television genres are most easily recognizable to illustrate this point: game shows, reality shows, sitcoms, documentaries, newscasts, dramas, sports programs—we could go on and on. Even if you are not a fan of one of these particular types of shows, you would likely be able to recognize its main features or characteristics. Genres function the same way in the discourse community they serve: anyone familiar to the discourse must be able to use the genre effectively or else they face the consequences of not abiding by expected conventions, which function as a means of communication used by members of the discourse community to meet its objectives and shared goals, where authority over the subject matter enables the conversation to progress, thus allowing the community to come closer to achieving its goals.

What are the goals and objectives of authority, and what do they accomplish?

As a student, your role in high school was often to provide your instructor a regurgitated account of facts and figures—an undigested version of the information presented during class or of which you read—void of your personal opinions or beliefs unless it was a reflection piece. And rightfully so; what authority did you have over the Western expansion of capitalistic ideologies as it affected frontier life and free enterprise? None, but you could have. If high school's purpose was stated more clearly to have provisions of “an information-transfer model of education” (Penrose and Geisler 612) where factual foundations were created with the clear intention that college would build on these later by developing the true, transferrable knowledge of why and how, we would have no issues. But this is rarely the case. There is no promise and no agreement that high school will provide this and college will do that. Not every individual enters or

completes college, and it is not always necessary. So we cannot make such agreements, and we must change the delivery and timing of when knowledge is permitted to be exposed to our youth.

Education paradigms, once moving at a glacial pace, are now experiencing dramatic shifts, as the educators themselves have become active researchers. Ann M. Penrose and Cheryl Geisler, authors and linguistic researchers, believe traditional approaches of information-transfer models of instruction are being contested by constructivist views of knowledge, where repercussions play out in varying degrees of consequence (612). But if knowledge is constructed, as Penrose and Geisler suggest, these contrasting theories both lead to “assumptions about individual authority [which] shape the way individuals approach intellectual tasks” and “determine the extent of the power that individuals are willing to claim within the educational and larger social system” (612). If you believe your role in your own education is merely reporting the facts, as their case study subject Janet did in her own experiences, it would not be radical to perceive that a lack of authority would pervade your approach to knowledge either, like it did for Janet as well. In a similar respect, linguist James Paul Gee suggests “that a person could be able to use a language perfectly and *still* not make sense” (483). If you apply that to knowledge gain, merely reciting the facts or the language do not equate to understanding *why* those facts matter or *how* that language has constructed that meaning.

So what are the goals and objectives of authority, and what do they accomplish? They give you ownership over your own education, and your own knowledge base. We are in a continual state of learning, of formulating and expanding our knowledge. Will we always be expanding and adapting our knowledge? The answer will always be yes, as conventions, genres, discourse communities, and authority are also in a constant state of revision and being repurposed to reflect the needs of the society that has created them.

How do we create authority, and why do these concepts matter?

Aristotle has long since left the Earth in *fact*. But in *practice*, his notion of *ethos* continues to prevail in discussions of authority. Ethos is credibility; it is establishing your authority with a given discourse community or context, through conventions or tactics commonly practiced within that discourse. As a college student it will be imperative that you understand this idea. While it has been mentioned that a constructivist view of knowledge is your main goal, the minor goal of recognizing

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each course or situation’s conventions of authority will facilitate that objective. You must use rhetorical knowledge of each course or assignment to be successful. To apply this concept so you may recognize its implications for you as a student, consider researcher Lucille P. McCarthy’s notion that “learning to write should be seen not only as a developmental process occurring within an individual student, but also as a social process occurring in response to particular situations” (671). Her suggestion of writing as a means to develop knowledge within an individual also serves to maintain the conventions utilized in discourse communities and within their specific genres. The same can be said for academic communities, where scholar and linguist Ann Johns notes that discipline-specific

allegiances exists, but a more universal interest in the development of student competencies and in generalized rules for scholarly communications connects those across varying fields. This interconnection leads Johns’ discussion towards textual conventions, the *how* and *why* they were created to provide a framework of acceptable use for diverse disciplines trying to communicate, interact, and borrow from each other’s work (503-4).

Why does this matter to a student attempting to create authority? It is necessary for new people to continue to enter and perpetuate a discourse community. This allows individuals to gain acceptance into that community and gain valuable school or career opportunities; otherwise, they

risk being left behind in society. New members drive the discourse community forward as well; without new members, a community risks losing its position in society and becoming irrelevant in any conversation or discredited out of authority. It is about maintaining and expanding power or dominance within society, and also admiration and prestige, which in turn lead to power. As a student now and later when you enter a profession, it will always be important that you recognize the interplay between authority and college courses, discourse communities, and the society they are a part of. Within each of these contexts, there will always be what Gee calls *dominant Discourses*, the “mastery of which, at a particular place and time, brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social ‘goods’ (money, prestige, status, etc.)” (485). Affiliation with dominant Discourses is often deemed most desirable, most popular, and most influential. Should you wish to enter one of these dominant Discourses, be it the Student Government Association or the American Society for Public Administration, it is of no consequence *why* you want to be a part of that community if you are unable or unwilling to play by the rules (the conventions, genres, use of authority, language, and so on) of that community; you will fail to be recognized as a viable member due to your lack of obedience. And why is this important to you as a student? To put these last couple of thoughts in a more positive light, it may help to think of the functional or practical applications: professionalism and formalities exist to ensure quality and standards elevate the individual, the discourse community, and the society. Should there never exist a desire to move past what has been accomplished so far, “an elite group that imposes its language, beliefs and values on others” (Prior as qtd. in Johns 513) would not be found over and over again in our society. But they are always found—they always will be.

More specifically, as a student, you must know what the expectations are for each course you enter (rhetorical knowledge), but understand that any knowledge gained, whether it be domain or rhetorical, could have a purpose later in your development. Within her study, McCarthy demonstrates how Dave, a student enrolled in different courses over three separate semesters, did not relate his experiences in each as having any purpose to serve him in his future endeavors. Dave impeded his own success in his acquiring transferable knowledge, as he continually saw himself “in a new foreign land” (McCarthy 685). What is often forgotten in an academic setting is the universal goal of creating multifaceted students who possess the very foundations universities were designed to instill within societies (McCarthy 694-5). I hope in understanding conventions within college coursework, it would be an explicit given that reading assignments and being prepared for class are basic tools that are easily acquired to increase domain knowledge.

Does domain knowledge *help* create authority? Yes, it does—it always will. Consider the example of the conversation you found yourself in at the beginning. Would it suffice to say that if you had no idea what was being discussed, you would not be able to communicate or comprehend for that matter? No, you would not. But if you *do* know the subject matter, you could be part of the conversation—until it shifts beyond your scope of informational knowledge towards conceptual or implicit meanings. And what if you disagree but cannot say *why* you differ in opinion from your peers? Most often, your opinion will be respected if you have knowledge to back it up or if you can tactfully persuade others with a distinctive delivery of original thought, regardless if they agree with you or not. And *why* is deviance important, or *how* does it function in the conversation, and in writing with authority for that matter? It allows the conversation to continue, encourages contemplation, and all academics, professionals, and individuals enjoy their thoughts to be meticulously scrutinized lest they be forgotten.

In her article, Johns asks the audience to consider what discourse community means not by providing a definition, but in posing a series of questions aimed to allow students to explore concepts. Her purpose is to inspire students to join the conversation, not by providing a direct answer, but by presenting questions that prompt readers to consider meanings and expressing the need for adaptive tactics for moving between connected communities. Penrose and Geisler demonstrate this concept similarly in their discussion of Roger, a student who employed case

studies to connect to, remodel, and restructure his previous knowledge in order to develop his own thoughts and construct new knowledge. His ability to construct knowledge by evaluating different and sometimes conflicting claims allows him to consider alternatives and arrive at his own conclusions. In contrast, Penrose and Geisler's other subject, Janet, adheres to a reporter-style approach of constructing her work. This approach not only positioned her to adopt a preexisting view, but placed her as an outsider to the conversation, where she could not deviate or vary from the sources' opinions. This in turn prevented her from developing her own opinions (609). Recall the bar scene in *Good Will Hunting*: Will is able to "get the girl" by emasculating the yuppie, pony-tailed character who attempts to prove his superiority by merely spitting out the ideas and concepts he memorized from a book; Will chastises him for being unoriginal. Though your aims and goals will not always be related to your love life, constructing your own original thoughts by applying domain knowledge effectively to knowledge of any given rhetorical situation will prove advantageous, time and again.

The reality is you are a student, and such a position almost undeniably suggests you need a mentor. So what do you do? Seek guidance, young grasshopper! To be successful in establishing authority in your writing (and in your life), you will have to align yourself with those who also have already done this. In college, this will be your professors—it is their chosen profession. It is a relationship, as you must understand their criteria and they must provide you with what that entails. As McCarthy notes, "Students and teachers. . . share a common aim and are engaged in a cooperative endeavor... the newcomer making trial efforts to communicate appropriately and the native speaker responding to them" (676). This relationship epitomizes authority in use and how you can gain it yourself. Your professors not only act as transactional managers of the grade you will receive, but as a transformational leader which may shape your acquisition of knowledge. The idea of apprenticeship presents itself time and again within college coursework. With every new class "enculturation. . . into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (Gee 484) becomes the tool by which you may gain the knowledge, and therefore the authority, to develop and progress as an individual agent of influence. Listen to the masters of each discourse you enter, but interpret their constructs as a means to develop your own. But wait! You are not ready yet. You will have to play by their rules for now—it will always start this way.

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