Academic Genres & Assignments

Any writing you do for the classes you take in college is considered academic writing. Most of this writing is done "on demand," meaning you are not writing because the muse inspired you, but rather because your professor told you to. Most academic writing begins when an assignment is given.

Some of the typical purposes of academic writing are to demonstrate that you can think in ways appropriate for the discipline, to give you practice with writing skills you'll need for other classes, to give instructors an opportunity to guide you as a writer and learner in a fairly personalized way through their feedback, and to give your instructors a chance to assess how well you have grasped the concepts and skills the course focuses on. You may have other purposes as well, such as to learn about the topic you are writing about and to share what you've learned with your reader(s).

In most academic writing, your audience will be your professor and sometimes your classmates. Sometimes your professor might tell you to write for another audience, such as the board of regents, the city council, community leaders, or local business owners. In some cases, your audience might be a wider one. For example, some instructors ask students to create or edit *Wikipedia* entries or to do other composing that will be published online for a public audience. If your assignment doesn't specify whom you are writing for, you should ask.

Genre is often dictated by the assignment itself. For example, academic assignments include the lab report, the annotated bibliography, and the film analysis essay. In these situations, you do not get to choose the genre you want to write in. You might be wondering now if this means that genre is not always a response to a rhetorical situation. It still is: Genre *is always* a response to a rhetorical situation. For example, if your biology professor asks you to write a lab report, that's because when someone in biology finds himself in a rhetorical situation in which the purpose is to report the results of an experiment and the audience is the professor or other biologist, the common social response is to write a lab report. Now, you could write a lyrical poem instead, and frankly, nothing is stopping you from doing so. However, whenever a composer gives her audience something very different from what they were expecting, there are consequences. In this particular rhetorical situation, the consequence could be an F on the assignment. (It's always a good idea if you want to deviate from the assigned genre to talk to your professor first.)

Some typical assignments you might encounter include a position paper in which you take and defend a position on an issue, an analysis of a film or art piece in which you discuss the choices the filmmaker or artist made, a literacy narrative in which you discuss an aspect of yourself as a reader and writer, a research report in which you share what you learned through research about a particular topic, a proposal to conduct research on a particular topic, a presentation to your classmates in which you share your research on a particular topic, and an annotated bibliography in which you summarize and analyze source material you have read in your research. You will find examples of some of these genres throughout the book. (For a list, see the Index of Genres.)

An academic genre that has a somewhat different rhetorical situation is the personal statement. A personal statement is an essay you write when you apply for a scholarship or to graduate school in which you explain to a funder or graduate program (your audience) why you deserve the scholarship or admittance to the graduate program you are applying for.

Below is an example of an academic genre you are probably somewhat familiar with: the academic research paper. Shown here is an excerpt of a paper Chase Dickinson wrote as a student at Weber State University in Utah. For the complete, annotated paper, see Chapter 7, "Academic Genres."