Interpreting the Conventions of Scholarship: Rhetorical Implications of the ACRL Framework

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abstract: Few librarians have examined the implications of Rolf Norgaard’s theory of “writing information literacy,” a rhetoric-based concept that situates research practices in context. Because the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education emphasizes research as a social practice, it seems appropriate to revisit this idea. This article explores how interpretive conventions—communal rules and guidelines that coordinate rhetorical construction and interpretation of texts—are implicated in each frame of the Framework and constrain participation in scholarship. This perspective can inform collaborations between librarians and faculty to develop critical rhetorical awareness, enabling students to read and respond to the interpretive conventions of any context.

Introduction

In two articles, one published in 2003 and the other in 2004, Rolf Norgaard presented the theoretical foundation for what he refers to as “writing information literacy.” Grounded in rhetoric—the study of how people use language, informed and constrained by social and situational contexts, to influence the behavior of a target audience—“writing information literacy” promised a “more situated, more process-oriented” conception of information literacy (IL) that could be “more relevant to a broad range of intellectual endeavors.” Rather than assume that generic IL skills and concepts can applied in all contexts to produce similar results, “writing information literacy” approaches research as a set of practices that must respond to the expectations of a social context. Few librarians or rhetoric and composition faculty, however, heeded Norgaard’s
call to initiate a dialogue. Whatever the cause, a shared language and literature describing a rhetoric-based approach to IL have not developed.

The lack of a rhetoric-based approach presents a potential challenge as academic librarians attempt to implement programs based on the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (the Framework). The previous conception described in ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (the Standards) was not concerned with context-specific iterations of information literacy. As Nancy Foasberg writes, “The Standards assume that information literate behaviors can be defined ahead of time by a body like ACRL, and that once learned they can be practiced in all situations.” This tendency to codify IL as a set of decontextualized skills has been criticized. In practical terms, this approach means librarians may be unprepared to teach research in the ways described by the Framework. That document, Foasberg argues, presents research as “a complex social practice that holds meaning only within specific communities of discourse.” Though the theory of rhetoric is never explicitly acknowledged, elements of it appear throughout the Framework. On a broad level, the Framework’s emphasis on entering conversations, constructing texts, and recognizing and establishing authority can be supported by a significant body of scholarship in rhetoric. On a more specific level, each of its six frames—Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information Has Value, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration—describes how experts use their context-specific knowledge and experience to make choices in the research process that align with the expectations and conventions of their discipline.

A rhetoric-based approach to the Framework can help students, particularly those in the early stages of their academic careers, to make sense of how context informs and constrains choices in the process of research. Full participation in the rhetorical activities of a disciplinary community, as Patricia Bizzell suggests, is privileged to those members who can use the “convention-bound discourse (academic discourse) that creates and organizes the knowledge that constitutes the community’s world-view.” As outsiders to an academic community, students have a significant obstacle to overcome. “With such limited experience outside their native discourse communities,” Bizzell contends, “they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered.” As a result, they may find it difficult to fully engage with scholarly conversations. Students may make choices that subvert convention or thwart expectation, such as citing Wikipedia or a popular magazine. Or they may perform a kind of uncritical mimicry, making appropriate choices without fully understanding why. These practices of the uninitiated are not signs of laziness or incompetence. Rather, they indicate ignorance of, or confusion about, a context’s specific demands. To negotiate the process of making situated choices, students need guidance.
A rhetoric-based approach to information literacy calls for the development of a critical rhetorical awareness: the ability to critically read and consciously respond to the rhetorical demands of any context. Such an awareness can prepare students to participate in the scholarly conversations of academic communities, and it can equip them to take part in a broad range of other nonacademic situations. A critical rhetorical awareness can make explicit the value and meaning of IL practices in contexts across higher education, as well as in myriad personal, professional, and civic settings outside academia.

An approach called the “social turn” in modern rhetoric may hold the answer to making a critical rhetorical awareness a practical reality. The “social turn” adopts concepts from the social sciences to treat “literacy as a social act that occurs within social situations.” This perspective sees the signifying practices or language that a community uses to understand and express its worldview as shaped by social, economic, and political forces. Using this assumption, this article explores how interpretive conventions implicated in each frame of the Framework constrain participation in scholarship.

Built on the concept of rhetorical conventions, “the formal and informal guidelines that define what is considered to be correct and appropriate, or incorrect and inappropriate, in a piece of writing,” interpretive conventions emphasize the ideological implications of such guidelines. To provide participants in a community with a repertoire of choices for responding to common situations, the conventions encourage particular ways of constructing and interpreting texts. Following these interpretive conventions is essential if participants hope to meet the expectations of other members within their community. Bizzell argues, “Producing text within a discourse community . . . cannot take place unless the writer can define her goals in terms of the community’s interpretive conventions.” In discussing these conventions, Bizzell is explicitly concerned with composing written texts. But such conventions are equally useful in analyzing choices in the research process, such as how search strategies are selected or how relevant evidence is chosen.

Fostering that kind of awareness in students requires librarians and disciplinary faculty to adopt a rhetoric-based approach to information literacy, one that acknowledges research as a situated and process-oriented practice. To do that, they must first view research in terms of the interpretive conventions of a social context.

The “Social Turn” in Rhetoric

To grasp the scope and function of interpretive conventions, as well as the potential difficulties students may experience identifying and responding to them, it is necessary to explore the relationship between ideology and rhetoric. This article adopts J. M. Balkin’s concept of “cultural software.” He generally defines ideology as socially constructed “ways of thinking about the social world or about others in the social world.” Key to this idea is an ambivalent attitude toward ideological power, which can be “simultaneously empowering, useful and adaptive on the one hand, and disempowering, distorting, and...
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maladaptive on the other.”15 How that power is wielded determines whether that ideology is inherently good or bad. This definition aligns with James Berlin’s argument that a discourse “can never be innocent, can never be a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others because it is always already serving certain ideological claims.”16 By requiring participants to adopt its ideological conventions, discourse becomes a political act. Invoking the Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn, Berlin offers a framework for making sense of how ideology encourages specific ways of thinking, knowing, and doing within a community. The ideology of a discourse defines what exists, “what is real and what is illusory, and, most important, what is experienced and what remains outside the field of phenomenological experience.” Ideology also prescribes what is good, “standards for making ethical and aesthetic decisions,” and what is possible, “the limits of expectation.”17 These ideological constraints are codified in a community’s interpretive conventions, setting expectations for what counts as appropriate or inappropriate in a situation. Constructing a text in accordance with these expectations, Berlin explains, is based “in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence.”18 Interpreting the value and meaning of any text is based in the same relationship, as members of the community judge whether it aligns with their community’s expectations. In using appropriate interpretive conventions, individuals become constituents of their social contexts.19 They become active producers of key ideological assumptions, not just products of them.

The concept of a discourse community provides a practical means for conceptualizing how an academic discipline is bound by these socio-rhetorical practices. Defined by John Swales, a discourse community does not find cohesion through proximity, cultural identity, or even a common object of interest; instead, it finds cohesion through a “broadly agreed set of common public goals.”20 In addition, a group must meet several other criteria to qualify as a discourse community. It must use a specific language to describe its worldview, supply mechanisms for community members to provide one another feedback, and offer genres to facilitate such sharing. Lastly, it must maintain a minimum number of members with an appropriate level of knowledge and experience.21 Discourse communities are implicated in the Framework: “Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.”22 Through language, genres, and other feedback mechanisms—all products and producers of interpretive conventions—a discourse community defines appropriate action for its members.

The boundaries between one discourse community and another, however, are hazy. Though an academic community is “united almost entirely by its language,” Bizzell argues, it is not a monolith.23 So long as there is agreement on broad public goals, the community need not concur on how those goals are achieved. “We might be better off viewing [academic discourse] as a polyglot,” writes Joseph Harris, “as a sort of space in which competing beliefs and practices intersect with and confront one another.”24 To complicate matters further, individuals can claim membership in multiple discourse communities, not all of which are academic. Each community may have different interpretive conventions and expectations to achieve its own rhetorical aims. These differ-
ences increase the likelihood of ideological conflict as individuals attempt to navigate the competing demands of multiple discourses.

For students, whose knowledge of and experience with an academic community may vary, the likelihood of such conflict could be high. To mitigate such confusion, a critical rhetorical awareness should provide students with the means for making sense of any context’s expectations. To achieve such a goal, librarians must investigate the implications of an approach to information literacy based on rhetoric’s “social turn.”

A Rhetoric-Based Model of Information Literacy

There is precedent in the library literature for looking at information literacy from a rhetorical perspective. In teaching research, Barbara Fister recommends a rhetorical approach. Jennifer Nutefall and Phyllis Ryder make a similar recommendation, specifically asserting that such means can help students “learn the research conventions of scholars and to recognize how research conventions differ across the university.” Foasberg echoes that suggestion in her analysis of the Framework’s use of social constructionist philosophies, which hold that knowledge is constructed through social interactions. Though they do not always specifically invoke the theory of rhetoric, calls to situate information literacy within a broader context—from such scholars as Ann Grafstein, Kate Manuel, Annemaree Lloyd, and James Elmborg, and from the team of Robert Farrell and William Badke—all argue for understanding the value and meaning of research skills and concepts. A few scholars have proposed teaching students to recognize and respond to the demands of a rhetorical context. Jeanne Davidson and Carole Anne Crateau recommend using rhetoric as a “speculative instrument” to help students navigate the conventions and perspectives of scholarly conversations. Joel Burkholder, the author of this article, suggests that librarians should teach sources as social acts, embedded in social and rhetorical purposes, to help students match their selection of evidence to the demands of the situation. Mary Broussard describes at length the importance of teaching IL with process-based research assignments. “Interdisciplinarity,” Michelle Simmons suggests, “provides librarians an opportunity to see how discourses differ across disciplines.” By serving as what she calls “disciplinary discourse mediators,” librarians can help sensitize students to context-specific rhetorical conventions. To date, however, no one has attempted to interpret information literacy in terms of rhetoric’s “social turn.”

Designing IL programs that develop a critical rhetorical awareness requires librarians to understand the rhetorical practices implicated in each frame of the ACRL Framework. The following is not intended as a complete inventory of every academic community’s rhetorical practices and interpretive conventions. Instead, it aims to highlight, through existing scholarship, how social contexts influence research choices to meet specific expectations and to provide a more holistic perspective on research and writing, which researchers must acquire to engage with their community’s scholarship. Though the Framework suggests a holistic approach (concepts that are “interconnected” and “integrated”), the simple alphabetical listing of its concepts does little to promote such perceptions. The analysis of frames in the following order—Scholarship as Conversation, Research as Inquiry, Searching as Strategic Exploration, Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, and Information Has Value—is an attempt
to make logical connections within and between rhetorical practices; it is not meant to imply a hierarchy of importance. This rhetorical perspective can inform collaborations with faculty across a college or university curriculum, as librarians design IL programs to approach research as a socially constructed, discursive practice.

Scholarship as Conversation

From a rhetorical perspective, Scholarship as Conversation is the closest the Framework has to a central concept. As noted earlier, discourse communities conduct conversations through the medium of a convention-bound discourse. For ideas to be “formulated, debated, and weighed against one another,” as the Framework suggests, they must be presented in ways that recognize the interpretive conventions of the communities in which those conversations take place. This allows members of a discourse community, asserts Peter Elbow, to “talk to each other as professionals in such a way as to exclude ordinary people.”36 In academic disciplines, a lack of experience with a community’s interpretive conventions—“the sources of evidence, methods, and modes of discourse in [a] field” highlighted in this frame7—makes it especially difficult for outsiders to offer contributions that insiders might interpret as meaningful. If participation is contingent upon the ability to use what Ken Hyland calls “effective rhetorical practices, accepted by community members,”38 members who possess sufficient knowledge of and experience with a discourse have an advantage. By making context-appropriate choices, they can enter conversations in their community with relative ease.

The knowledge and experience gained through experience within a discourse community give members a sense of a discourse’s limits. “We write,” states Harris, “not as individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both constrain and instigate, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say.”39 Interpretive conventions provide boundaries for what exists, what is good, and what is possible. Consider physicians and the Hippocratic Oath or biologists and the theory of evolution. Rejection of these fundamental beliefs, these boundaries, would violate the conventions of these disciplines. Adherence to them is essential for participation. Other claims, perhaps those requiring more evidence, such as the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies or the intelligence of certain dinosaur species, may be the subject of debate. But as Harris suggests, complete agreement on all points is not necessary: “Matters of accident, necessity, and convenience hold groups together as well.”40 A psychologist may
easily publish in a sociology journal but may struggle to publish in a physics journal. The goals and interpretive conventions of psychology and sociology are compatible; the goals and interpretive conventions of psychology and physics may not be. A community’s epistemology, its perspective on what counts as knowledge, constrains action. Choices in the research process, such as the methods used, the selection of tools and sources, the construction of authority, the synthesis of evidence in expected forms, and the attribution to previous ideas, all inform participation in scholarly conversations. To be accepted as a credible contributor, one’s choices in the research process must recognize the limits set by the context.

**Research as Inquiry**

Within an academic discourse community, the process of inquiry provides members with new ideas that can be added to scholarly conversations. “Experts,” states the Framework, “see inquiry as a process that focuses on problems or questions in a discipline or between disciplines that are open or unresolved.” The open, unanswered nature of these problems or questions is key to academic cultures that reward original contributions. To fill such gaps, individuals are required to rhetorically justify their investigations. They need to argue that a contribution (even if it replicates a previous study or challenges existing dogma) extends understanding within a community’s knowledge domain. The justification, which often takes the form of an article’s literature review or a book’s introduction, must be expressed in terms of a community’s interpretive conventions.

For individuals who have little experience working within the constraints of academic discourse, justification may be difficult. First, they may lack understanding of what their target community counts as knowledge. Consider how various disciplines might approach the legalization of marijuana. Nurses might organize their knowledge around treatment options. Biologists might focus on physiological interactions within the body. Political scientists might concentrate on the implications of government policy. The epistemology of each community affects how inquiry is framed and conducted.

There may be reasons a community leaves questions unanswered. The failure of librarians and of rhetoric and composition faculty to establish a shared vision of “writing information literacy” is an example. Lisa O’Connor argues that librarians have used information literacy to legitimize their professional expertise in a time of radical change; sharing responsibility with another discipline may be seen as counterproductive to that goal. Second, gaps are often identified in the context of disciplinary activities, such as “laboratory or field experiments, formal or intuitive observations, or extensive reading.” In the classroom, these activities must be simulated, which may not clearly demonstrate the situated nature of these practices. Third, the researcher must use methodologies that support the community’s worldview. The sciences, for example, may require investigators to follow ethical guidelines and to design experiments and analyze results in accordance with accepted disciplinary protocols. The same is true for the humanities; methods based in history, phenomenology, or tex-

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Tual criticism must follow the accepted principles and procedures of the field of study. Finally, outsiders must do all of this while navigating the conventions of an unfamiliar discourse that codifies existing knowledge (more on this in the next section). When participants fail to justify their methods rhetorically, their research has little hope of extending knowledge in a field.

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Searching is a dialectical process of selecting strategies, retrieval tools, and sources of evidence to address the demands of a rhetorical situation. Tools and strategies, suggests Fister, must be employed “to choose evidence for their own rhetorical purposes—to ground their argument in a context appropriate for their audience.”44 The call to construct a search according to the principles of rhetoric is echoed by Donna Witek, Mary Broussard, and Joel Burkholder.45 Making strategic and appropriate choices, of course, is predicated on an understanding of how a discourse organizes knowledge within an academic community.

Academic retrieval tools are organized around the languages of the communities they serve. They must mirror a discipline’s interpretive structures; otherwise, members may find it difficult to access their community’s scholarship. Overlap between discourses makes possible interdisciplinary use of certain tools. Psychology and sociology both study human behavior, but they do so at vastly different scales—the individual versus society. Since their worldviews differ, different retrieval tools exist (for example, PsycINFO indexes scholarly publications in behavioral science and mental health, and Sociological Abstracts does the same in sociology). Similar interpretive conventions mean psychologists and sociologists can use one another’s resources. But when trying to employ tools organized around different conventions, such as SciFinder Scholar, which indexes chemistry publications, or IEEE Xplore, which covers engineering and electronics, psychologists and sociologists might be less successful in navigating the other field’s discourse. The design of academic retrieval tools privileges acculturated members over inexperienced novices. This could explain academia’s bias against popular search tools, such as Google. Serving general populations, these search tools organize results by popularity rather than reflect any discipline’s epistemology.

Searching, in part, depends on the ability to describe the concepts being researched in ways that recognize a community’s interpretive structures. “Search terms,” writes Fister, “are contingent on who is speaking.”46 Think of the difference between “heart attack” and “myocardial infarction.” The former, used by the lay public, presents a vague description of a medical problem. The latter, used by medical professionals, gives a definitive diagnosis: tissue death in the heart due to lack of oxygen. The situated terms of a discourse are often embedded in the metadata—in the titles, abstracts, and subject headings—of academic retrieval tools. For that reason, brainstorming and searching decontextualized keywords and their synonyms, an exercise often used to teach database searching, can fail to retrieve relevant results.

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Assuming that fluency with a discourse improves the ability to search discipline-appropriate tools, a disciplinary insider will likely find the forms of evidence that are expected in scholarly research: peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, doctoral dissertations, conference proceedings, and the like. These sources define themselves through the interpretive conventions of the communities they represent (more on this in the discussion of “Information Creation as a Process”). Again, this expectation may partially explain academia’s bias against popular sources, such as websites and magazine articles. The interpretive conventions behind their creation are different from those of academic discourse communities.

**Authority Is Constructed and Contextual**

In a discourse community, a participant’s authority, at least as it pertains to subject expertise, is primarily constructed and maintained through discourse. As the Framework implies—“Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority”—authority is a relational concept based in rhetoric. For an individual within a community to possess authority, the person’s claim to expertise must be constructed in ways that an audience can recognize. Authority is always constructed in context, recognizing and responding to constraints set by that context.

To be recognized as authoritative, for example, contributions to a discipline’s scholarship must rhetorically establish an individual’s expertise through appropriate interpretive conventions. These conventions include visible elements, such as listing credentials and referencing sources. But authority is also accomplished, writes David Bartholomae, by adopting “the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of [a] community.” In scholarship, Peter Elbow argues, these conventions allow “a certain impersonality and detachment all working toward this large and important goal of separating feeling, personality, opinion, and fashion from what is essential: clear positions, arguments, and evidence.” Using these conventions allows individuals to establish what is called in classical rhetoric an *ethos*, a character or reputation. It comprises the qualities of an individual that are perceived to be credible. Such appeals are evaluated in terms of established interpretive structures. Participation is limited to those individuals “who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege.” Bound by context, different communities will recognize different authorities, even within the academy. Deviations from these structures help acculturated members identify outsiders who may lack the requisite background to participate. Experts with recognized authority in one subject (for example, the history of Civil War medicine), may find it difficult to be seen as experts...
in another (for example, otolaryngology). This can be true between different communities, as well as different branches of the same community. Individuals whose authority is primarily associated with what the Framework calls “societal position” or “special experience”\textsuperscript{51} may fail to be recognized as credible participants in or across communities unless they use appropriate conventions to meet expectations.

**Information Creation as a Process**

Rhetorically persuasive contributions to a community’s scholarship must be shared in expected genres. Without explicitly labeling this as a rhetorical process, the Framework hints at it: “Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method.”\textsuperscript{52} In the “social turn,” genres are not solely defined by similarities in form, content, or both; rather, they are defined by their social function. Described by Carolyn Miller as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,” genres are responses to certain rhetorical situations that occur with frequency in a community.\textsuperscript{53} As social acts, explain Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin, genres “are intimately linked to a discipline’s methodology, and they package information in ways that conform to a discipline’s norms, values, and ideology.”\textsuperscript{54} To be rhetorically persuasive (and subsequently, to serve as legitimate representations of a community’s ideology), genres must be constructed in accordance with interpretive conventions. Within academic communities, there are many genres, such as “lab reports, working papers, reviews, grant proposals, technical reports, conference papers, journal articles, [and] monographs”\textsuperscript{55} that facilitate participation in scholarly conversations. Every choice in each of these genres has a specific social purpose. In a journal article, there are conventions related to structure (for example, the IM-RaD format, which organizes a scientific paper into four main sections: introduction, methods, results, and discussion). Other conventions govern terminology (disciplinary jargon), appeals to authority (credentials), tone (clinical), and evidence (other scholarly sources), all chosen for their demonstrated ability to share new research findings with peers. Different academic discourse communities, of course, have different conventions. Scholarship in the humanities may seem different from scholarship in the sciences, but the two fields have similar intellectual structures—problems are defined, analytical methods are described, evidence is collected, and results are presented. Regardless of specific expectations, an individual’s ability to use the varied genres of a discipline is a component of professional success. Such knowledge is equally useful in interpreting the contributions of others, an assertion supported by the Framework: “Recognizing the nature of information creation, experts look to the underlying processes of creation as well as the final product to critically evaluate the usefulness of the information.”\textsuperscript{56}
Information Has Value

From a rhetorical perspective, information’s value is largely determined by ideology, not money. By suggesting information has value “as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world,” the Framework acknowledges the influence of social context. In guaranteeing all members of an academic community the same “rights and responsibilities when participating in a community of scholarship,” notions of value are reflected in and reinforced by its interpretive conventions. Analyzing the social function of citations illustrates this point. Generally, citations act as appeals to authority. When appropriate and relevant evidence is cited, citations help establish the trustworthiness of claims. They also provide continuity between old and new ideas, furnishing a map of the scholarship on a given topic. Knowing these connections is critical for identifying gaps in the literature. Finally, citations—either in the text or in a list of references—give proper credit to those who contribute ideas to a community’s conversations. This correlates with prohibitions on plagiarism. Participants in an academic community are expected to offer original contributions through the community’s shared discourse, not steal the words of others. Theft violates convention and erodes the perceived value of a contribution to the broader conversation. For a piece of evidence to perform these social functions, it must be cited. An exception to this is common knowledge. But widely accepted ideas may vary from community to community, making it difficult for scholars to determine what deserves acknowledgment outside their areas of expertise.

Citation styles codify these expectations. How a source is documented, writes Susan Mueller, “arises out of a set of values and concerns that is pivotal to the discipline in question.” The types of sources each style accounts for, notes Gregory Smith, say something about the evidence it deems appropriate. Used to document scholarship in the humanities, the Modern Language Association (MLA), for example, believes any text can be studied and cited. In fact, the MLA Handbook Eighth Edition shifts its focus “from a prescriptive list of formats to the overarching purpose of source documentation: enabling readers to fully participate in the conversations between writers and their sources.” Used by the social sciences, the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association emphasizes traditional sources of evidence of academic research, such as monographs, journal articles, dissertations, and technical reports. Regardless of the style, the inclusion of key elements identifying the author, title, and publication allows for consistent retrieval and attribution. The act of citing is not simply busywork: it is a social convention. Citation styles must mirror the epistemological concerns of the communities that use them.

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A Holistic Conception

Individuals implementing a situated, process-oriented approach to the Framework must investigate how its core concepts are connected. Each frame can certainly be taught on its own; that may be the only practical way to teach a complex, social practice. But as the preceding paragraphs illustrate, rhetorical practices often interact to enable participation...
in scholarly conversations. Facility with a discourse and its interpretative conventions affects how an investigation is staged, how a tool is searched, how authority is constructed, and how information is synthesized and attributed. There are countless other ways the frames interact with and support one another, and they should all be explored. But the Framework’s statement “Each library and its partners on campus will need to deploy these frames to best fit their own situation,”

Each frame is a part that contributes to the whole. Librarians should try to understand how the concepts work together in practice to implement intentional programs based on the Framework. A holistic conception may also provide a more robust foundation for the development of a critical rhetorical awareness.

Developing a Critical Rhetorical Awareness

Helping students learn to identify and respond to the ideological demands of social context may prove challenging, but attempts to do so could make the concept more relevant in settings throughout and beyond higher education. This critical rhetorical awareness seeks to increase the agency of students as they identify and negotiate situated practices in any context; it does not attempt to replace every convention in their native discourses. The academic, Bizzell warns, “seeks to subsume other world-views to which the student may retain allegiance.”

Consider why academic communities are called “disciplines.” To become insiders, new members are socialized to discipline their thinking and action. But, Ian Beilin warns, “Teaching students how to function within an academic discourse can be perilously close to teaching students how to conform, how to get along, how to succeed.” It prepares them to work uncritically within a single context. How, then, do students learn to navigate the worldviews and interpretive conventions that organize the personal, professional, and civic communities they inhabit? A critical rhetorical awareness must help students recognize and respond to the interpretive conventions of any discourse community.

For guidance on intentionally developing such an awareness, it is useful to look at how genres are taught as social acts. Explicit teaching of any genre’s conventions, argues Arviva Freedman, reduces the rhetorical process to a formula. And formulas can be an ineffective means of teaching social practices. They marginalize difference, providing students with little guidance on the contextual variations of a single genre. Explicit teaching also demands that a formula be learned for every genre. Approaches based on genre awareness, on the other hand, teach students how to recognize the ways a genre’s conventions reflect its social purpose. As defined by Amy Devitt, genre awareness is “a critical consciousness of both rhetorical purposes and ideological effects of generic forms.” It is a schema that can be used to learn key genres when encountering new social contexts and situations. To develop this consciousness, genres (for example, a journal
article) must always be analyzed and understood within the rhetorical and cultural ideologies where they are employed (for example, an academic discourse community). Analyzing how context elicits textual regularities, Devitt encourages students to “work back and forth from the language to the context, from the context to the language.”68 This process, known as rhetorical analysis, can expose the ideology behind the interpretive conventions; it reveals the inclusion or exclusion of certain choices as purposeful and strategic decisions.69 With practice, students can explore how different choices might alter the intent or effectiveness of a genre.70 For example, what happens to a journal article’s credibility if it lacks citations? Or if academic citations appear in a newspaper story? Failing to explicitly acknowledge a genre’s social and rhetorical purposes makes this kind of analysis difficult. Rhetorical analysis is not a singular activity; it is a general approach to understanding texts that constantly seeks to uncover the situated constraints set by ideology. Sensitizing students to the situated nature of genres also places ideology in the foreground, giving students more awareness of, and more control over, its potential effects.

For genre awareness to serve as a useful template for a rhetoric-based approach to information literacy, it must foster a critical rhetorical awareness of how ideology shapes IL practices, not just the construction of genres. Some practices are process-oriented. The formulation of a research focus or the selection of search strategies, for example, may not be readily visible in a text’s final form. A critical rhetorical awareness must explicitly acknowledge all conventions and practices related to research.

A New Model of Collaboration

Though this awareness may make the value of IL practices more evident in a wider range of contexts and situations, neither librarians nor disciplinary faculty may be well prepared to foster a critical rhetorical awareness of research practices. Immersed in context, members of any community may have little perspective on how a disciplinary ideology influences the discipline’s worldview. Norman Fairclough explains:

> It should not be assumed that people are aware of the ideological dimensions of their own practice. Ideologies built into conventions may be more or less naturalized and automatized, and people may find it difficult to comprehend that their normal practice could have specific ideological investments.71

...genres (for example, a journal article) must always be analyzed and understood within the rhetorical and cultural ideologies where they are employed (for example, an academic discourse community).
The result is what Joan Turner calls a “discourse of transparency.” With her colleague Theresa Lillis, Turner contends that members of discourse communities often treat their conventions “as if they were ‘common sense’ and [are] communicated through wordings as if these were transparently meaningful.” Unaware of the full scope of their ideology’s influence, members of a discourse community may struggle to be reflective and explicit about the rhetorical and cultural purposes of conventions. Consider how the concept of “credible” can be defined in relation to a discipline’s interpretive conventions. In a survey of how faculty members define terms related to the evaluation of information—timeliness, authority, bias, verifiability, and logical consistency—David Woolwine found discipline-specific variations in the social sciences, the sciences, and the humanities. When students fail to meet the rhetorical expectations of a discipline (of which they may be unaware or which they may be unable to articulate) and select strategies, tools, and sources that violate context-specific conventions, those with discourse experience judge them by the standards of their discipline. A disciplinary faculty member’s awareness of the ideological implications of context is clearly a component of preparing students to participate within the community. Making the workings of language visible to acculturated members of a community is necessary, according to Lillis and Turner, “to reflexively critique the assumptions and expectations that have their roots in a socio-culturally different historical period and look to the formation of new pedagogies that better engage with students.” In being critical of the interpretive conventions of their own fields of study, disciplinary faculty may prepare students to participate critically in others. Implementing a rhetoric-based approach to information literacy that is both situated and process-oriented requires librarians and disciplinary faculty to confront the ideological constraints of their respective discourse communities.

To lead discussions about this approach, teaching librarians in higher education must first expose the ideology of one of information literacy’s most dominant discourses: the belief in generic research skills that have universal value and application. Though there are exceptions (for example, faculty/librarian collaborations or credit-based courses), many librarians have limited instructional contact with students that may consist only of interactions at a reference desk, tutorials on a website, or one-shot instruction sessions in a classroom. Generic approaches (for example, trial-and-error methods for teaching question formulation, worksheets for teaching Boolean searching, or checklists for teaching source evaluation) align with the needs of limited instructional contact. Marginalizing differences and ignoring context-specific interpretive conventions make information literacy practices easier to teach. These practices
also allow librarians, to some degree, to claim ownership of the IL movement. But they ignore a key assumption of the Framework: interpretive conventions, situated within the activities of a community and reflecting its worldview, can only be understood in context. This expectation shifts primary responsibility for developing a student’s information literacy to disciplinary faculty. Questioning the ideology of generic IL may make many librarians uncomfortable, but it is integral to leading discussions that describe information literacy as a context-bound social practice. And it is integral to the development of a critical rhetorical awareness in students.

So how do librarians situate IL practices within authentic social and rhetorical contexts and help disciplinary faculty become more reflective about their practices? To situate information literacy effectively in context, argue Farrell and Badke, librarians must first convince disciplinary faculty that the librarians are “peer educators capable of answering questions or providing feedback about curriculum,” as well as able to bring “to awareness any gaps in disciplinary goals for student learning in the area of situated information practices.” With the Standards, the values and beliefs of disciplinary communities were often generically redefined in terms of the library profession’s interpretive conventions (for example, anthropology and sociology, journalism, nursing, science and technology, and teacher education). In collaborating with disciplinary faculty to implement the Framework, it is useful to define information literacy in terms of the interpretive conventions of other scholarly communities. In this way, disciplinary frameworks, the documents that articulate the concepts and practices that an academic community sees as essential to participation, can be useful. These statements can be reductive as they attempt to capture complex social practices, but they can give a sense of a discipline’s ways of thinking, knowing, and doing. Even if the documents do not explicitly mention information literacy, disciplinary frameworks reveal the interpretive conventions that influence research practices. Using the appropriate discourse provides an entry point into a discipline, which Larissa Gordon and Eleanora Bartoli suggest may allow “for much greater initial ‘buy in’ from the faculty member, continued ‘buy in’ from the students, and greater applicability of library and information literacy into the specific course in question as well as the program as a whole.” These advantages are key if librarians hope to perform the role of disciplinary discourse mediators as recommended by Simmons. Acting as outsiders, librarians can ask questions that sensitize faculty to the privileged nature of participation in their disciplines.

Acting as outsiders, librarians can ask questions that sensitise faculty to the privileged nature of participation in their disciplines.
A critical rhetorical awareness of any context’s interpretive conventions must move students from basic awareness of such conventions to guided application and independent critique. To ensure that collaboration with disciplinary faculty matures into rhetoric-based information literacy, librarians should emphasize the importance of scaffolding, providing successive levels of support to move students toward a critical rhetorical awareness. Teaching students to negotiate social practices (for example, the social functions of the rules in a citation style) requires more instructional time than teaching a discrete skill (for example, citation formatting). Farrell’s classification of learners as beginners, competent performers, and proficient performers is a useful structure for organizing collaborations. It allows librarians and disciplinary faculty to identify performance indicators at the basic level that demonstrate a critical rhetorical awareness of interpretive conventions; observable behaviors at a competent level that demonstrate nascent attempts to apply that awareness in a variety of contexts; and articulated understandings and transformative abilities at the proficient level that show the ability to navigate and critique the unique demands of any setting.

Attempts to articulate research as a complex, social practice are vital for designing an intentional curriculum.

Building IL programs that interrogate discourses and question interpretive conventions promises to be difficult. The entrenched ideologies that inform the varied communities within higher education—librarians, disciplinary faculty, and administrators, to name a few—may resist such an approach. But as the preceding pages demonstrate, research is a social and rhetorical practice, not a set of predictable generic skills. How IL skills and concepts are taught to students must evolve to align with this conception. Focusing on the intentional development of a critical rhetorical awareness can help students to negotiate the various demands they encounter through a college or university curriculum. It may also help them to transfer such an awareness to personal, professional, and civic contexts beyond the academy.

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Notes
3. Melissa Bowles-Terry, Erin Davis, and Wendy Holliday, “‘Writing Information Literacy’ Revisited: Application of Theory to Practice in the Classroom,” Reference & User Services


7. Foasberg, “From Standards to Frameworks for IL.”


15. Ibid., 126.


17. Ibid., 479.

18. Ibid., 488.


21. Ibid.


28. Foasberg, “From Standards to Frameworks for IL.”
34. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” introduction.
36. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” “Scholarship as Conversation.”
39. Ibid., 19.
40. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” “Research as Inquiry.”
47. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual.”
50. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual.”
51. Ibid., “Information Creation as a Process.”
54. Ibid.
55. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” “Information Creation as a Process.”
56. Ibid., “Information Has Value.”
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
63. Bizzell, “What Happens when Basic Writers Come to College?” 299.
68. Devitt, Writing Genres, 199.
70. Devitt, Writing Genres.
74. David E. Woolwine, “Generic versus Discipline-Specific Skills,” chap. 8 in Practising Information Literacy: Bringing Theories of Learning, Practice and Information Literacy Together,

76. Farrell and Badke, “Situating Information Literacy in the Disciplines,” 326.
77. ACRL, “ACRL Standards, Guidelines, and Frameworks,” 2018, http://www.al.org/acrl/standards/guidelines/topic. These documents provide examples of appropriate resources and effective strategies, but they are based on ACRL’s 2000 Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and still assume generic research skills that have universal value and applicability in all disciplinary situations.

79. Farrell and Badke, “Situating Information Literacy in the Disciplines.”
81. Simmons, “Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators.”
83. Farrell and Badke, “Situating Information Literacy in the Disciplines.”
84. For example, Rachel McMullin, “Information Literacy Assessment,” University Libraries, West Chester University, West Chester, PA, 2018, https://library.wcupa.edu/infolitassessment.