

Exploratory & Transactional Writing

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In some seminal composition theory, James Britton classified writing into three types: **transactional**, **expressive**, and **poetic**. *Poetic writing* includes all genres of *literary writing* (fiction, poetry, drama, the literary essay, song lyrics, etc.) I've substituted the term "exploratory writing" for Britton's term "expressive writing" (because, for Americans, "expressive" often connotes emotional content, whereas I want the term to connote both emotional and intellectual content). In general, *exploratory writing* is used as **a tool of thinking** and learning, while *transactional writing* is **a tool of communication** with others. It is vitally important that writers work with both exploratory and transactional writing. It's often said that doing transactional work without grounding it in exploratory work is like building a house without a foundation. Following are fundamental distinctions.

EXPLORATORY WRITING

PURPOSE: To help you learn the content of the course.

AUDIENCE: Yourself (and, possibly, others very familiar with your subject & purpose, such as your classmates & instructor)

EXAMPLES: Concept maps, mind maps, hierarchical trees, journals, logs, reading notes, marginal notes, field notes, to-do lists, outlines, informal messages, and letters, early drafts of formal writing.

CORRECTNESS: Only what is necessary for understanding.

EVALUATION: Exploratory writing is not meant to be judged as a well-written display of knowledge; it is effective if

- ★ everyone who needs to read it can understand it;
- ★ it helps you explore & develop your thoughts & feelings;
- ★ it helps you recognize what you know;
- ★ it reveals what you don't know or are confused about; it stimulates further reflection and dialogue.

TRANSACTIONAL WRITING

PURPOSE: To give form to your knowledge and skills and communicate them to others.

AUDIENCE: Your professor and/or other readers, such as peers in the profession or general readers.

EXAMPLES: Academic & scientific papers, business letters and memos, reports, reviews, informational articles, brochures, etc.

CORRECTNESS: The writing must follow the conventions your audience expects and is familiar with: conventional spelling and punctuation and grammar, proper format and style.

EVALUATION: Transactional writing is meant to be evaluated by the audience, who will usually look for such elements as

- ★ clear organization and train of thought,
- ★ adequate development of ideas,
- ★ clear reasoning,
- ★ effective engagement with and guidance of the audience,
- ★ an appropriate tone and a respectable persona
- ★ concise and coherent prose,
- ★ conventional spelling, punctuation, formatting, etc.
- ★ informed use of disciplinary conventions (such as documentation style, tables and figures, etc.).