

The Content, Contextualization, and Effectiveness of Writing-Assignment Instruction

Documents

by

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Abstract

This study of writing-assignment instruction documents (WAIDs) uses concepts from Rhetorical Genre Studies to examine WAIDs as a rhetorical genre by exploring the information that WAIDs contain, their contextualization within the university classroom, and how they situate users within that context. Further, it compares instructor and student perceptions to infer how WAIDs can most effectively communicate instructors' expectations for assignments and foster quality writing. My analysis of (a) WAIDs from 11 sophomore courses, (b) interviews with students and instructors from two sophomore courses, (c) WAIDs from those two courses, and (d) students' assignments written with those WAIDs suggests the following: WAIDs contain up to twelve categories of information, reinforce classroom roles, and set boundaries for student action, and yet students may see WAIDs as supplementary to in-class discussion of instructors' expectations for assignments. Also discussed are differences between the two sophomore classes in students' recognition of expectations for writing assignments.

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List of Acronyms

FASS – Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

RGS – Rhetorical Genre Studies

RQ – Research Question

WAID – Writing-Assignment Instruction Document

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Chapter One: Introduction

Essays, research papers, literature reviews—producing these and other types of writing assignments is a core component of the university student experience. In conjunction, developing, distributing, evaluating, and offering feedback to these assignments is a central facet of the work of university instructors. Writing assignments thus represent one of the major ways that a dialogic relationship between students and instructors is instantiated in the classroom. Among the many ‘dialogues’ that occur in this setting, the ‘student-submits-writing / instructor-provides-feedback’ exchange is initiated by the instructor’s provision of assignment instructions. This dialogic turn serves to convey the instructor’s expectations for the assignment to the student, and might later inform the two modes of expression by which the instructor responds to the student’s submitted work—assignment grade and feedback. Since writing assignments frequently are high-stakes propositions for university students, conceptualizing the mentioned student-instructor interaction as a dialogue highlights the beneficial nature of clear communication from instructor to student. Since the clarity of this dialogic exchange so often hinges on the instructions that initiate and inform it, the research presented here seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of the forms that writing-assignment instructions take in the context of the university classroom and the impact that these forms have on students’ writing performances.

1.1 — Situating the Study

Among the many aspects of academic writing that have received research attention, a modest number of studies have focused on writing-assignment instructions. The majority of this work has dealt with writing prompts, which I define here as ‘questions or topic statements that

initiate a written response'¹. These studies have primarily explored the development of effective prompts, their rhetorical and typological features, and students' understanding and uptake of them (e.g., Kroll & Reid, 1994; Hobson, 1998; Horowitz, 1987; Oliver, 1995; Way, Joiner, & Seaman, 2000; Pillai, 2014). Hobson (1998) suggests that the writing prompts given to university students are often unaccompanied by explicit instructions about what style of paper to write and/or "specific guidelines that describe the expectations about citation formats, page formats, amount and type of research, and reporting structures" (p. 52).

In contrast with Hobson's claim, I have observed through my work as a tutor with Carleton University's Writing Tutorial Service that students are regularly provided with detailed writing-assignment instruction documents (WAIDs² for short; commonly referred to as 'assignment sheets' or 'instruction sheets') that frequently contain writing style advice, grading rubrics, suggestions for writing and research processes, and other information in addition to writing prompts. Surprisingly, little or no research literature exists about the design or effectiveness of this type of document. While writing prompts are an essential part of WAIDs, I contend that these documents deserve to be studied in both the entirety of their contents and the ways in which they are used in university courses, since they represent one of the major ways in which writing topics are contextualized for undergraduates³. If, as Head and Eisenberg (2010)

¹ I submit this definition as a reworking of Kroll and Reid's (1994) "a stimulus for the student to respond to" (p. 231).

² WAID is pronounced as 'wade.'

³ I further contend that the term Writing-Assignment Instruction Documents (WAIDs) is the most ideal term for referring to what might traditionally be called assignment sheets. In one of the handful of existing studies that resemble mine, Clark (2005) uses the term 'writing assignments' to refer to what I am calling WAIDs. Clark's term is problematic because it lacks specificity. It could be misunderstood to mean the written work that students submit, or to mean 'the instance of requesting that students produce writing.' For example, an instructor could conclude a class session by requesting that students write a reflection on the week's assigned readings, without distributing any sort of document. For this same reason, the term 'writing-assignment instructions' is not appropriate for the concerns of this study. Neither is the term 'instruction sheets,' since writing-assignment instructions can be distributed digitally. Throughout this report, I often apply the term WAIDs in place of terms that other researcher

assert, students repeatedly turn to the writing prompts they have received to guide their writing, then surely they turn every bit as often to the documents which contain the prompts. These documents—WAIDs—warrant a closer look.

The research presented here is meant to address the lack of research attention devoted to writing-assignment instructions in the context of classrooms and coursework. By (a) developing a taxonomy of the information contained within WAIDs, (b) observing and inquiring about how they are contextualized in undergraduate classroom settings, (c) gathering students' perceptions of the documents provided to them, (d) comparing these perceptions with the assignment goals that their instructors identify in interviews, and (e) examining the writing produced in response to these documents, it has been my goal to contribute to a better understanding of the content and efficacy of the instruction materials that are currently being used at Carleton University. I hope that the conclusions I draw from my data will foster increased scholarly attention to the design and use of WAIDs, and I hope that this attention will inspire greater awareness among all members of the academic community of the genres we use to communicate, and how we can use them as effectively as possible.

1.2 — Research Questions

Oliver (1995) asks “what makes a good assignment?” (p. 422) and also explores what makes an effective writing prompt. On the premise that WAIDs are the de facto vessel for writing prompts and a principal means by which instructors initiate assignments, I hereby recast Oliver's question as “what makes an effective WAID?” With ‘effective’ defined for my purposes

have chosen. As far as I am aware, this report is the first instance of its use. One ideal outcome of this report's publication would be widespread adoption of the term in future discourse and literature. See Chapter 5.1.1 for evidence in support of the usefulness of the term WAID.

as ‘clearly communicating an instructors’ goals⁴ for an assignment and eliciting student writing that demonstrates recognition and uptake of these goals,’ this study investigates the textual features (the types of information they contain) and contextual factors (what they are used for in coursework and the extent to which they are discussed by the instructor during class sessions) that characterize WAIDs and their use in an undergraduate liberal arts course setting, by attempting to answer the following questions:

1. Beyond the writing prompt itself, what types of information frequently appear in WAIDs across curricula in Carleton’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences?
2. What features of WAIDs can students be observed to attend to most frequently in their written work?
3. What features of WAIDs are most effective in helping students produce the type and quality of writing desired by their instructors?
4. In what classroom circumstances are WAIDs most effective in enhancing students’ confidence, understanding of the assignment, and writing performance?

Question 1 (RQ 1) assumes that WAIDs contain various types of information additional to their main directives (writing prompts). It also assumes that much of this information is intended to guide students through the writing process, to direct them to resources, and to offer advice on *how* to form written arguments. I formed these assumptions during my tenure as a writing tutor with Carleton University’s Writing Tutorial Service (WTS), where I encountered hundreds of WAIDs from a wide range of undergraduate disciplines. I address RQ 1 by

⁴ As the instructors would define them themselves.

collecting a corpus of WAIDs and analyzing it using a Modified Grounded Theory technique (Charmaz, 2006). I develop these findings through the lens of Rhetorical Genre Studies.

Question 2 (RQ 2) assumes that certain features of students' writing might be traceable to certain features of WAIDs, and that this connection might be discoverable by combining a close analysis of WAIDs, the instructions students receive in class, and the finished writing products they produce in response. Question 3 (RQ 3) assumes that certain features of WAIDs (for example, certain types of information or certain types of advice) might be more helpful than others in guiding students to produce what their instructors would consider to be high-quality writing. RQ 3 also supposes that students can recognize and point out these features. Answering RQ 2 and RQ 3 necessitates data drawn from authentic university coursework and classroom sessions. I address these questions by (a) interviewing instructors from two classes about the writing they have assigned and the WAIDs that accompany these assignments, (b) interviewing students from these two classes about these WAIDs, the additional instructions they have received during class sessions, and what they perceive their instructors' expectations for the assignments to be, and (c) collecting and examining the actual writing that students submit for these assignments.

Question 4 (RQ 4) assumes that writing assignments are usually discussed during class sessions, and that instructors might make reference to their WAIDs during these discussions. It also assumes that these acts of contextualizing assignment instructions might be carried out to different extents or depths. Further, it assumes that comparing courses in terms of these acts of contextualization could support assumptions about which methods most effectively imbue students with confidence and develop their understanding of what is expected in their assignments. I address this question through classroom observation and students interviews.

1.3 — Thesis Overview

In Chapter Two, I locate the territory that my study stakes out within the existing literature by reviewing the questions that researchers have asked of writing prompts and writing instructions. These include endeavours to categorize writing prompts according to their informational or rhetorical features, and queries about the impact of their varying forms on high-stakes writing-test performances and on classroom writing and research behaviour. I also discuss research that has brought students' voices to the forefront by focusing on student experiences with and impressions of the writing instructions they receive in university courses. I then turn to considerations for pedagogy, by providing a full account of researchers' suggestions about how to best develop and use writing instructions in the classroom. I end the chapter by identifying the gaps in the discussed body of literature that this thesis attempts to address.

In Chapter Three, I present the theoretical framework that I use to analyze my data. In doing so, I have two purposes: First, to summarize seminal and representative works from the Rhetorical Genre Studies tradition that have contributed to my interest, and influenced my approach, in researching WAIDs. It is here that I trace the 'social turn' of genre analysis in the latter half of the 20th century, touching on contributions from Bitzer (1968), Bizzell (1982), and Miller (1984). My primary focus is on these researchers' progress toward an understanding of genre as a form of situated activity arising in response to perceived recurring needs. My second purpose is to explore the concepts from these works that I later employ in my discussion of the data, and to argue for their usefulness in relation to my research questions. These are Bazerman's (2004) notion of intertextuality; Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi's (2004) heuristic for genre analysis; and Freedman's (1994) uptake.

In Chapter Four, I detail the research methods that I used to address each of my research questions and present my rationale for choosing them. I then describe how I compiled my corpus of WAIDs and my procedure for selecting the two courses from which I drew my interview participants (and whose WAIDs I also collected and analyzed). I recount how I recruited the participants (both students and instructors) and the procedures I followed in interviewing them. I then introduce Modified Grounded Theory Analysis (Charmaz, 2006), explain its merits as an analytical technique for the data I collected, and detail how I applied the technique to my WAIDs corpus, participants' interview transcripts, and students' submitted writing assignments. I conclude Chapter Four by discussing the limitations of my research design.

In Chapter Five, I present the findings of my analyses and develop them using the analytical framework established in Chapter Three. I offer evidence to support an understanding of WAIDs as a genre in the RGS tradition. This includes my observations of the ways in which WAIDs are used within the university course context and the purposes that they appear to serve. I provide a detailed description of the types of information that appear in both my corpus of WAIDs and the WAIDs used in the two courses I investigated, in an effort to deliver a snapshot of some of the features that characterized the genre in Carleton's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 2013. I also discuss the interviews I conducted with participating instructors and students. I end the chapter by looking at the extent to which my collected data offer answers to my research questions.

I begin Chapter Six by looking back to the impetus for this research in order to survey the progress that has been made toward addressing the needs for (a) a fuller understanding of writing assignment instructions in their complete form and (b) a fuller understanding of these instructions as documents in use in the context of the university classroom. I then identify the

questions that remain unanswered or only partially answered, and revisit the limitations that my data and research methods might have imposed. I follow this by suggesting future research designs that could improve upon what I have done, or which could be used to pursue new questions that have emerged from my findings. I conclude by considering potential applications for my findings and identifying groups who might benefit from them.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I present an overview of previous scholarly work concerning writing prompts and writing-assignment instructions⁵. I organize my discussion according to the types of questions researchers have asked of such instructions. Section 2.1 looks at the myriad ways that writing prompts and instructions have been categorized and the extent to which variation within these categories impacts student performance. Each piece of literature discussed in this section has been included because it tells something about the ‘shapes’ that writing instructions have assumed, either textually (on the page) or contextually (within the classroom). An understanding of these shapes and the purposes to which they have been put will inform my attempt to characterize WAIDs, the fullest form in which writing instructions are presented.

Section 2.2 examines published advice about writing instructions from educators and researchers and considers competing attitudes toward the ideal amount of detail that instructors should provide. These works provide context for my analysis of the informational content in the WAIDs I have collected. Additionally, by representing the diversity of opinions about how writing instructions ought to be structured and used, this selection of literature functions as a standard against which my own findings will be contrasted.

Section 2.3 identifies gaps in the existing literature and surveys the territory that my research questions stake out. My study stands to make contributions to our understanding of the forms and roles of writing assignment instructions in the context of the university classroom, with considerations for their effective design and use. I highlight these intended contributions in the third sub-section.

⁵ Writing prompts and writing-assignment instructions could—and in many cases arguably should—be treated as different entities, though the former is often contained within the latter. I had considered devoting separate sections of my literature review to each, but I instead decided to structure this chapter according to the types of questions that have been asked of each, which often overlap.

2.1 — Prompt Characteristics

Writing prompts vary on a number of dimensions (Kroll and Reid, 1994)⁶. Researchers and educators have endeavoured to identify these dimensions, categorize their varied forms, and determine whether particular categories affect various aspects of students' writing. These dimensions can be grouped according to three general features of interest: typological features—the amount of information and the types of information that prompts contain; rhetorical features—the modes of rhetoric and types of knowledge that prompts elicit from writers, and whether prompts address their audiences personally or neutrally; and presentational features—how prompts are presented in class and whether they are presented as narrative paragraphs or in segmented forms on the page. An additional concern, explored by a handful of studies, is the extent to which prompts allow or constrain students' freedom in the content of their responses. Previous inquiries about the constraints imposed by writing prompts, alongside their typological, rhetorical, and presentational features, form the foundation for the research I present in this thesis, since I operate on the assumption that WAIDs also feature these characteristics, but in an expanded format that students presumably experience differently than shorter-format⁷ instructions. Existing research that has addressed each of these features is discussed in the subsections that follow.

⁶ One obvious basis on which prompts differ is subject matter. The effect of subject matter on various aspects of student writing is a chief concern of test developers, particularly in the effort to avoid high-stakes writing test material that might vary in its accessibility to different groups of test-takers (e.g., Pomplun, Wright, Oleka, & Sudlow, 1992; Lee, Breland, & Muraki, 2004). As interesting as this issue is, it is not pertinent to my research questions. In similar fashion to the difference between prompts and assignments that I discussed in footnote 3, I see rhetorical and typological features as belonging to the essence of prompts, and features of subject matter as belonging to the essence of assignments.

⁷ By shorter-format instructions, I refer in particular to the styles of prompts, generally ranging in length from one sentence to one paragraph, which much of the research in section 2.1 has focused on. I assume that students experience WAIDs differently from these styles of writing prompts for two reasons: one, WAIDs are used in a different context (as part of university coursework, rather than on exams or as ad hoc creations of researchers to be used in studies); and two, WAIDs are significantly lengthier (meaning that full-perusal places a greater cognitive demand on the reader).

A cautionary note: There are no officially agreed-upon definitions for the terms ‘writing prompt’ and ‘writing instructions.’ The literature I review here uses these terms to refer to a range of things, from single sentences to which students respond on essay exams to lengthier collections of paragraphs that are distributed to students in university courses. For the purpose of clarity, I use the term ‘writing prompt’ to refer to statements or questions to which students respond in writing. I use the term ‘writing instructions’ to refer to writing-support materials that are lengthier or more multi-faceted than prompts. To keep my discussion organized, I have in some cases chosen to use these terms in place of the terms originally used in the work I review. Where possible—though it is not always clear in some studies—I have attempted to include identifying or characterizing details about the materials researchers have used.

2.1.1 — Typological features

The two major typological features of writing prompts clearly identified in the literature—amount of information and types of information⁸—have received roughly equal research attention. The question at the heart these studies is whether increasing or decreasing the amount and types of information in writing prompts measurably affects the writing that students produce in response. Researchers have asked this question of many different groups of learners, in many different contexts, and with respect to many different aspects of students’ writing quality.

2.1.1.a — Amount of information

In much of the work addressing the impact of varying amounts of information in

⁸ ‘Types’ generally refers to whether the information in a prompt addresses the content or the form of the written response.

prompts, researchers develop prompts to represent easily differentiated categories of length or detail. Student-participants are then recruited to judge or write in response to these prompts, with each category representing a different experimental condition. Notable examples of these types of researcher-drafted categories are the ‘bare prompt,’ ‘framed prompt,’ and ‘text-based prompt’ introduced by Kroll and Reid (1994). They believe these categories broadly encapsulate the most common ways that writing topics are presented to students. Their bare prompts were single-clause directives with an identified topic, their framed prompts presented specifying details about how an identified topic should be treated in writing, and their text-based prompts presented short passages followed by statements or questions targeting the text (or aspects of it). This distinction between bare/framed prompts and text-based prompts presages the focus of research discussed in the next subsection, since text-based prompts necessitate the presence of information which originally had a function, in its source context, separate from the function of the prompt.

Brossell (1983) took an empirical look at another way that prompts can be differentiated on the basis of information quantity. Students who wrote in response to prompts with a moderate degree of rhetorical specification⁹ were shown, on average, to have outperformed students who wrote to less-specified or more-specified prompts. Though the differences in means were not found to be statistically significant, the moderate group produced longer essays and garnered a higher average rating of holistic quality than the other two groups. Brossell’s distinction between low, medium, and high rhetorical specificity is something of an artificial construction, but it provides a useful way of thinking what the details in writing prompts often do. As Brossell shows, the language of prompts shapes what is preferred or what is possible in a response by narrowing, to varying extents, the role the writer is expected to play. Prompts that Brossell

⁹ Here, the term ‘rhetorical specification’ means the extent to which the information in the prompt situates the student in a particularly subjectivity toward the writing topic.

classes as highly rhetorically specific feature several qualifying statements about the position from which the writer will treat the topic. In a similar design, Hoetker and Brossell (1989) analyzed several hundred essays written in response to essay-exam style prompts that were either one sentence in length or five sentences in length. The prompts in each condition addressed the same topic, but the longer prompts also shaped the context for the response, identified an audience, and commented on the purpose for responding. A comparison of the mean holistic scores yielded by each prompt condition found no statically significant differences. On this basis, the researchers suggest that less rhetorically specific prompts might be preferable, since they afford students more freedom to choose how they would prefer to shape their responses.

Rhetorical specification has also been examined in connection with more specific aspects of student writing. A pair of studies, each concerned with a different level of schooling, looked at whether increased information about the goals of an assigned rhetorical mode has a measurable impact on students' production of the discourse features valued in the particular style of writing (Ferretti, MacArthur, & Dowdy, 2000; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005). Ferretti et al. divided fourth and sixth grade elementary school children, half of whom were identified as having learning disabilities, into a general-goal writing group and a specific-goal group. In the general group, students were instructed to write a persuasive letter to a parent or teacher about a controversial topic. In the specific goal group, students were given the same instruction but were also directed to attend to five specific subgoals of argumentative discourse. Sixth-graders in the specific goal condition produced letters that were rated as significantly more persuasive and that contained more identifiable elements of argumentative discourse than their counterparts in the general goal condition. No such significant effects were observed among the fourth-graders, suggesting that specific goal instruction is an effective strategy for helping older students increase their grasp of

modes of discourse. The students with learning disabilities were found to have performed similarly to their normally abled classmates in all conditions.

Nussbaum and Kardash (2005) applied Ferretti et al.'s design in the university setting, with a specific concern for the extent to which elaborated goal instruction would affect undergraduates' generation of counterarguments and rebuttals in a 30-minute argumentative essay-writing exercise. Students were either instructed to write their opinion on whether watching TV increases children's violent tendencies, to write their opinion on this topic and include as many reasons to support it as possible, or to write their opinion and include several counterarguments followed by rebuttals. Those who received the specific third instruction produced significantly more counterarguments and rebuttals in their essays than those in the other conditions. On the assumption that identifying and rebutting arguments counter to one's position is a central tenet of good academic argumentative writing, Nussbaum and Kardash point to these results to emphasize the importance of instruction specificity in helping students overcome the "my-side bias" (p. 159) to which they might otherwise resort in this mode of discourse. Students appear to benefit from receiving writing instructions that identify and encourage the valued characteristics of the assigned rhetorical approach.

Increasing the specificity of writing instructions generally requires increasing their length. Changes in prompt length might result in changes in prompt readability, something of concern for instructors working with non-native English speakers. Hayward (1990) had native English speaking university students and ESL students rate a selection of prompts on their perceived ease or difficulty, as well as their interest level in each. A comparison of each group's ratings showed strong correlations between interest level and perception of ease or difficulty at each level of readability, as measured by the Flesch Readability Index. On measures of length,

however, ESL students showed a preference for longer prompts (the prompts used in the study ranged in length from 29 to 121 words, with an average length of 53). Hayward speculates that non-native English speaking writers see longer prompts as generative of longer responses, because more content means more opportunity to mine the language for points to attend to and for cues toward ideal response structures.

2.1.1.b—Types of information

A few studies have sought to categorize the types of information that appear in writing-assignment instructions. Canseco and Byrd (1989)¹⁰ examined assignment instructions from syllabuses used in courses within a graduate-level business administration program. They determined that the information in these sets of instructions fell largely into two categories: (1) details about appropriate format for the response and (2) details about appropriate content and how that content should be organized. Canseco and Byrd found that the nature of these two types of information served to tightly control the ways students were able to experience and respond to their assignments. It appeared that students were rarely permitted to make their own decisions about rhetorical approach, scope of information and sources, or format and organization. The constraints that assignment instructions impose is discussed further in sections 2.1.4 and 2.2.

Butcher and Kintsch (2001) posited that assignment instructions typically contain content information and information about the intended audience for the assignment, and that the amount of detail provided for the two categories might not always be equal. To test the effects that instructions that weight one category over the other would have, the researchers provided a

¹⁰ Canseco and Byrd (1989) used the term ‘prompts’ to refer to something much closer to my definition of WAIDs than to my definition of writing prompts: “detailed explanation by the instructor of the content and organization expected in the written product” (p. 310).

sample of undergraduates with a scientific paper detailing a memory experiment, whose introductory section had been removed. Students were asked to thoroughly read the paper and then write the missing section. One group was guided in this task by a set of instructions that focused on the content that the introduction to include; the other group received instructions that focused on the rhetorical strategies typically employed in scientific papers to address the intended audience. Analysis of the two groups' work showed that students who received instructions that focused on content were better able to establish connections with the paper's discussion section in their introduction. This finding suggests that writing instructions play a significant role in shaping how students conceive of and perform a given task.

Students might need help recognizing the distinctions between the types of information that feature in the instructions they are given. Developing this recognition requires learning how to cut a swath through the verbiage and separate component parts. Pillai (2014) deconstructed the language of university research essay instructions in two ways. A macro-analysis revealed that typical instructions make five distinct rhetorical moves: providing background information, overviewing the task, identifying cognitive demands, giving procedural directions, and setting assessment expectations. A microanalysis focused on the verbs used to guide students' responses sorted these verbs into two broad groups: those that identify mental processes (e.g., examine, analyze, critically evaluate), and those that identify verbal processes (e.g., describe, explain, discuss). A subsequent survey showed that students tend to prefer verbal-process prompts because they feel that the required responses are more straightforward. On this basis, Pillai recommends that instructors spend time discussing with their classes what is meant by often-misunderstood mental process terms such as analyze and critically evaluate.

Some researchers have bridged the gap between concerns with types of information in prompts and the amount of information in prompts. Using the same distinctions that Kroll and Reid (1994) drew between framed prompts and text-based prompts, studies by Smith et al. (1985)¹¹ and Brown, Hilgers, and Marsella (1991) focused on the same writing context (freshman placement essays) but with different purposes and different results. Smith et al. measured the length and number of grammatical errors produced by freshman university students in response to a personal-experience based framed prompt or a reading prompt, both addressing the same topic. The framed prompt condition yielded significantly longer essays and significantly more errors relative to length. Looking instead at holistic essay ratings, Brown, Hilgers, and Marsella found no significant difference between the mean scores garnered by freshmen's responses to personal experience-based framed prompts and reading prompts.

In another study with a similar combined focus, Oliver (1995) investigated whether the holistic quality of writing produced by seventh, ninth, and eleventh graders and university freshmen would vary in response to combinations of different levels of detail on writing topic, assignment purpose, and target audience. Eight different versions of an original writing prompt were created by either increasing or decreasing the specificity of these three types of information. University freshmen's writing quality showed the greatest sensitivity to correspondence between topic and audience: their writing quality was higher in response to prompts with either high levels of information about topic and audience or low levels of information about topic and audience. Prompts in which one of those variables was highly specific and the other was less specific resulted in responses of overall lower holistic quality.

¹¹ This is the first time I have cited Smith et al. (1985). The full citation is Smith, Hull, Land, Moore, Ball, Dunham, Hickey and Ruzich. In accordance with the recommendation in section 6.11 in the 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* regarding works with six or more authors, I have used only the truncated citation in my text.

2.1.2 — Rhetorical features

In contrast with the research discussed above which looks at how the types and amount of information in writing instructions affects how students write, research that explores the rhetorical features of writing instructions is primarily interested in cataloguing the modes of rhetoric (e.g., argumentative, descriptive) and types of knowledge (e.g., personally close versus personally distant, content versus process) that prompts elicit from writers, with an eye to how changes thereof might impact various dimensions of student performance. A related concern is with the rhetorical nature of writing instructions themselves: how they address their audience and whether this has an impact on how students understand and approach their written work.

2.1.2.a — *Modes of rhetoric*

Research about *what* types of writing students are asked to produce is not directly related to the concern of this report, which focuses on *how* students are asked to write, how they feel about how they are asked to write, and how the ways they are asked to write affects how they write. However, a handful of studies have explored how these two concerns can overlap.

In an experiment with high school learners of French, Way, Joiner, and Seaman (2000) simultaneously investigated the effects of prompt type and task type on a number of linguistic dimensions. In the context of writing a reply to a penpal, students were asked to write either a descriptive, narrative, or expository response about an issue on which the fictional penpal had inquired. This task was prompted with either a bare prompt (simply explaining that the student had received a letter from a friend, with a brief description of the contents of the letter and a task-type injunction), vocabulary prompt (same as above, but with an accompanying list of vocabulary that might be useful for the response and a task-type injunction), and a narrative

prompt (the entire contents of the friend's letter, plus a task type injunction). There were nine possible task-prompt combinations. Each participant received three of these possible combinations (one per month, for three months)

Students' responses were evaluated holistically, and were measured for word count, mean length of t-units (main clause plus any embedded subordinate clauses or phrases), and percentage of error-free t-units. The design did not permit an assessment of category-interaction effects. Among response modes, holistic quality was highest for descriptive writing and lowest for expository writing. Among prompt types, the narrative prompt garnered the highest quality responses by a statistically significant margin. On this basis, the researchers favor the value of prompts which personally engage the writer. The narrative prompt appeared to establish a clearly defined and realistic purpose for writing, and offered context to aid in specifying the intended audience for the response.

Breland, Kubota, Nickerson, Trapani, and Walker (2004) applied a similar design to the university placement essay context. The researchers looked at whether ethnic, cultural, or language background biases might arise from the use of persuasive prompts in place of discussion prompts on the American SAT, and whether the level of the detail in these prompts made a difference. With a diverse group of eleventh grade students drawn from 49 high schools, the researchers collected essays written on two separate occasions in response to four different prompts: a standard SAT discussion prompt on the topic of failure, a standard SAT discussion prompt on the topic of happiness, a new and more detailed persuasive prompt on the topic of failure, and a new and more detailed persuasive prompt on the topic of happiness. Breland et al. found neither effects for detail nor any significant differences in holistic scores among the diverse groups of students who participated.

In the context of another high-stakes writing scenario—GRE essays—Bridgeman, Trapani, and Bivens-Tatum (2011) presented volunteer examinees with six different task variants of argument prompt (provide alternate explanations, identify unstated assumptions, identify specific evidence, evaluate a prediction, evaluate a recommendation /predicted result, evaluate a recommendation) and of an issue prompt (evaluate a claim and its supporting reasons, discuss two competing positions, discuss agreement or disagreement with a generalization, discuss a policy position, identify and evaluate counterarguments, discuss agreement or disagreement with a generalization). The scores from the 17,000 participating test-takers showed that there was little variation in holistic quality across all variants. These results suggest that the interaction between rhetorical mode and task type matters little with regard to the overall quality of students' responses, and that the use of such variants may be warranted in order to dissuade students from attempting to memorize ready-made responses.

2.1.2.b — Types of knowledge

The types of knowledge that writing assignments elicit have been categorized in two different ways: how students are asked to demonstrate what they know (Horowitz, 1987) and the extent to which writing topics require reflections on personal familiarity and experience with those topics (Powers & Fowles, 1999; Hinkel, 2009). In subsection 2.1.1.b, I addressed similar studies conducted by Smith et al. (1985) and Brown, Hilgers, and Marsella (1991) which showed contrasting findings regarding the effects of being asked to draw upon experiential knowledge.

The lone instance of the first category comes from Horowitz (1987), who sought to establish a taxonomy of university essay examination prompts in order to assist foreign students in recognizing the displays of knowledge that prompts ask of them. Through an analysis of 284

essay examination prompts from 15 academic departments at an American university, he classified prompts into four general ‘frames’ on the basis of the type of knowledge display they required: “I. Display familiarity with a concept, II. Display familiarity with the relation between/among concepts, III. Display familiarity with a process, IV. Display familiarity with argumentation” (p. 110). He presents subdivisions within each of these categories, for a total of 20 distinct rhetorical frames that students might be asked to produce on essay exams. On this basis, Horowitz advocates explicit instruction for foreign students¹² in sentence- and discourse-level patterns appropriate to each of these frames.

Powers and Fowles (1999) also focused on the essay-exam writing experience, but with an interest in whether certain aspects of essay prompts result in greater or lesser appeal to students when the choice among several prompts is available. They presented upcoming Graduate Record Exam (GRE) registrants with selections from a total of 78 potential GRE essay prompts. Students were asked to rate, on a seven-point scale, their confidence that they could write a strong essay for each prompt. They were also asked to identify the prompts that they would feel most confident and least responding to and provide written explanations for their two choices. A topic’s relatability and familiarity, or lack thereof, was the most commonly cited reason why students reported having high or low confidence in their ability to formulate successful responses. However, in a second segment of the study, students were asked to write essays in response to two of the prompts they had previously rated. Mean scores earned for the essays, when grouped and compared according to their ratings on the seven-point scale, showed no statistically significant differences. It is worth noting, though, that high or low ratings of confidence did not mean, in every case, that the topics were personally familiar or unfamiliar.

¹² Horowitz (1987) cites statements from Swales (1982) and Houghton (1984) as evidence that non-native English speaking students are likely to be in need of this sort of instruction.

In contrast, personally relatable writing topics, in comparison with those which address personally distant issues, have been linked to disparity between the lexical features of native and non-native English speakers' writing. Hinkel (2009) found that university students who had emigrated from China, Japan, and Korea used a significantly higher number of modal verbs expressing obligation and necessity than native English speakers in response to essay topics that drew on lived experiences. In response to a topic that was presumably unconnected to students' lived experiences, this disparity in verb usage was not observed. Hinkel does not argue that Asian students' frequent usage of specific types of modal verbs is undesirable; rather, he sees it as evidence that some topics are likely to elicit responses with marked characteristics from students with particular cultural and language backgrounds.

The findings of Smith et al. (1985) and Hinkel (2009), when compared with the findings of Brown, Hilgers, and Marsella (1991) and Powers and Fowles (1999), suggest that prompts which draw on experiential knowledge do have an impact on certain features of students' writing, but that this impact is not wide-reaching enough to significantly affect holistic writing scores. However, as Horowitz (1987) notes, personally oriented prompts are likelier to be chosen by students when choice is available, and are likely to inspire confidence. Indeed, a survey with 500 university students showed that students rate domain-specific knowledge, interest, experience, and data availability as the strongest factors in making writing on a given topic feel achievable (Huang, 2008). Each of these factors seems to dovetail with experiential knowledge.

2.1.2.c — How students are addressed

Brossell and Ash (1984) investigated whether writing prompts that are addressed to the writer directly are likelier than those with a neutral address “to result in rambling narratives or

[...] in greater engagement” (p. 423). The researchers modified 21 prompts from an academic skills assessment exam to create two versions of each: one that personally addressed the writer, and one that did not. Prompts were also varied in that some were formed as questions and others as commands. These variations allowed for four basic combinations: personal questions, personal commands, neutral questions, and neutral commands. Analysis of over 900 collected responses evaluated on a 4-point holistic scale showed no significant differences between mean scores of the four conditions. Hoetker and Brossell (1989) also found no effects for personal or impersonal prompt conditions. Similarly, Kobrin, Deng, and Shaw’s (2011) analysis of 6750 SAT essays showed no significant differences between scores for responses to neutral prompts and opinionated prompts.

Students report greater confidence in prompts that draw upon personal experiences (Huang, 2008). These are often phrased, to give two examples, to directly ask for “your opinion” or about “your community” (Powers & Fowles, 1999, p. 12). However, as discussed in section 2.1.2.b, students’ increased confidence on this basis has not been shown to result in work that differs significantly from responses to prompts that inspired lower confidence.

2.1.3 — Presentational features

Two recent studies have focused on how writing prompts are presented to students—one concerned with classroom presentation (Hudson, Lane, & Mercer, 2005), the other with how instructions are presented on paper (Schwilk, 2010). Both studies indicate that modes of presentation can have a pronounced impact on writing performance, especially for students who are struggling at their level of study.

Hudson et al. (2005) explored the effects of pre-writing priming conditions on the compositional fluency of second grade elementary students. For a timed story-writing task, students were prepared in one of six ways on six separate occasions: with a story-starting prompt copied from a projection, with a story starting prompt copied through dictation, with a story-starting prompt copied from a projection along with a class discussion of the assigned story topic, with a story-starting prompt copied through dictation along with a class discussion of the assigned story topic, with a class discussion of the story topic, or with a prompt instructing students to write a story about an assigned topic. Students' stories revealed no significant aggregate differences in composition fluency (number of words produced within a given timeframe) across the priming conditions. A notable exception was discovered, however, for students who had been assessed as deficient in handwriting and spelling. Their compositional fluency was significantly lower when they were required to copy information prior to writing. Hudson et al. suggest that such activity diverts their focus from generating ideas about the assigned topic, instead requiring that their cognitive faculties be devoted primarily to orthography. This group of students performed best when writing following the class discussion condition. These findings emphasize the benefits of instructor-directed idea-generating exercises, especially for those students who struggle with writing mechanics.

Schwilk (2010) also addressed issues concerning struggling writers, though in the context of community college developmental reading classes populated by first and second year students. Students presented 78 students with either explicit writing instructions (an itemized list rather than in paragraph format) or the same instructions written in a traditional narrative paragraph format, and asked students to identify the necessary steps required to successfully complete the assignment. On average, those in the explicit list condition correctly identified more than twice

as many tasks as those in the paragraph condition. Those in the paragraph condition, however, identified a significantly higher number of implicit tasks (behaviours that follow logically from explicit tasks, such as the need to visit the library or search databases in order to locate sources) than those in the explicit list condition.

2.1.4 — Constraints

The extent to which writing instructions constrain available response options is not ‘measurable’ in the way that prompt length or rhetorical specification are measurable or observable, but it is a characteristic of instructions that affects how students approach, experience, and produce their assignments. Furthermore, as with all of the above-discussed details of prompts, it is a characteristic that is present in WAIDs as well. In fact, it is often present in greater degrees due to the increased number of categories of information that WAIDs have in comparison with writing prompts (see chapter 5.3.2). A handful of researchers have addressed these constraints, some through commentary on the issue, others through empirical inquiry.

In a survey of writing assignments from across the curriculum, Arapoff-Cramer (1971) observed that a student often “has little choice about the selection and organization of the facts he uses since the nature of his topic or question requires him to choose certain data in a certain order data” (p. 164). By way of a similar approach, Horowitz (1986) called the tightly controlled nature of undergraduate writing assignments “the most striking feature of the [data] sample,” and contended that two assignments that expect the same outcome but control students’ decision making to different extents cannot be thought of as the same sort of task (p. 452). Canseco and Byrd (1989) likewise found frequent instances of imposed control in their analysis of writing

instructions for 55 graduate-level assignments. Restrictions were typically placed on topic choice and report organization. Dirk (2012), citing common impositions such as the requirement that students cite from each of their chosen sources a particular number of times, notes that these conditions are never requirements of the putative genres that students are requested to produce; rather, they are constraints put forth by the instructor, by-products of the pedagogical context.

Constraints imposed by writing prompts might help students recognize assignments goals steer them toward the organizational structures favoured by genres integral to particular disciplines. In some cases, however, this can be counterproductive to the writing purpose, as shown by Furtak and Ruiz-Primo (2008) in one of the few empirical explorations of the extent to which varying levels of constraint in writing tasks affect student performance. Middle-school science students were presented with four formative assessment prompts, each encouraging what they determined to be different levels of 'openness' from students¹³. The prompts were designed to elicit students' developing conceptions of sinking and floating phenomena. The researchers did indeed observe a positive correlation between the openness of the prompts and the range of conceptions that students produced in their writing. Since instructors generally use forms of formative assessment to discover the extents to which students grasp course material, Furtak and Ruiz-Primo recommend designing formative prompts to place few constraints on students' thinking. These results correspond with Smith et al.'s (1985), where freshman-level placement essay prompts that encouraged reflection on personal knowledge and experiences elicited both longer responses and more grammatical errors relative to length than prompts on the same topic that required a response to a reading passage.

¹³ Furtak and Ruiz-Primo (2008) evaluated the four prompts in their study according to the nature of their 'outcome spaces.' The outcome space for a prompt in which students view and interpret data on a graph is relatively constrained by design, they argue, whereas the outcome space for a prompt that poses an open-ended question is constrained only by the knowledge the respondent possesses.

2.2 — Advice on Creating and Using Writing Instructions

A large portion of the literature concerning writing instructions that is published in scholarly journals is intended to offer suggestions to instructors about how to create effective writing instructions, what to include in them, how to help students understand their tasks and directions, and how to present instructions to students. Many of these suggestions are based on the personal teaching experiences of the authors, often detailing what has worked for them or successful changes they have made to their instructions. Here I explore the most common themes and suggestions from this advice-giving body of literature, followed by a review of the opposing schools of thought on how detailed writing instructions should be. The diverse recommendations and opinions discussed here provide context for my analysis of the WAIDs corpus and the WAIDs from Courses A and B (with regard to both what information is included in them and how they are presented in the classroom) and serve as a basis for comparison with my findings.

2.2.1 — How instructions should be prepared and presented

Numerous educators have introduced sets of guidelines to help instructors prepare effective assignment instructions. These often take the form of checklists or heuristics. Simon (1988) recommends that instructions be clear, complete, concise, and candid. Throckmorton (1980) presents a 16 item checklist whose items coalesce into five criteria that writing instructions should satisfy: being appropriate, stimulating, instructive, purposeful, and measurable¹⁴. Others have suggested that instructions should specify their assignment's aim, mode, audience, and purpose (Hoffman & Schifsky, 1977; Herrington, 1981); that instructions should detail the genre and goals of their assignment, without prescribing a particular writing

¹⁴ By 'measurable', Throckmorton (1980) means the inclusion of detailed grading criteria in assignment instructions.

process (McClymer & Moynihan, 1977); that instructions include examples of successful iterations of assignment components (Krause, 2001); that instructions identify and encourage students to produce the desired characteristics of the appropriate response type (Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005); that instructions be as engaging as possible (Sjoberg, Slavit, & Coon, 2004).

Another common suggestion is that instructors spend time discussing their instructions in class (e.g., Grauerholz, 1999; Hudson, Lane, & Mercer, 2005; Macbeth, 2006, Pillai, 2014). As a part of the classroom discussion, some researchers recommended that instructors guide students through a genre analysis of their writing assignments, particularly in first-year composition courses (Devitt, Reiff, & Bawarshi, 2004; Beaufort & Williams, 2005; Dirk, 2012). Going a step further, Clark (2005) urges instructors to do genre analyses of their own instructions before distributing them to students. The result, she suggests, is that instructors will become more aware of the hidden assumptions that underlie the instructions they present, and thus will be more likely to find ways to make these assumptions and expectations explicit and clear to their students.

Likewise, literature distributed by university writing centers (e.g., Procter, n.d.; Ryan, n.d.) encourages instructors to carefully consider their choices of words or examples in the instructions they create, noting that instructors often fail to recognize that what is plain to them might be abstruse to their students. Psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker has weighed in on the issue, borrowing from the famed work of economists Camerer, Loewenstein, and Weber (1989) to recast their ‘curse of knowledge’ bias as one of the leading causes of incomprehensible academic writing. Pinker (2014) writes that there is “great difficulty in imagining what it is like for someone else to not know something that you know” (p. 9). This is why it often doesn’t occur to scholars that their “readers haven’t mastered the patois or can’t divine the missing steps that seem too obvious to mention” (p. 10).

The recommendation that comes up most often in these articles, however, is that instructors include detailed grading criteria (such as grading rubrics) with the writing instructions that students receive (e.g., Grauerholz, 1999; Klotz, 2001; Leahy, 2002; Fukuzawa & Boyd, 2008; Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Morozov, 2011). Klotz (2001) goes as far as to suggest that, within the freshman composition course context at least, grading rubrics be discussed with the class and open to revision in the case of student consensus. In a similar vein, Leahy (2002) proposes that instructors draft grading criteria in concert with their students. He contends that this approach invites students to be active participants in the life-cycle of assignments, and reduces the sometimes adversarial nature of the student-instructor relationship that can be aggravated by what Fernsten and Reda (2011) call the traditional method of simply assigning, correcting, and returning papers. Those in favour of distributing grading rubrics share the general recommendation that rubrics be comprised of what Leahy calls a ‘primary trait analysis’—a model which identifies the dimensions on which the assignment should be graded, along with detailed descriptions of strong, average, and weak performances on those dimensions.

A primary trait analysis encourages students to deconstruct their assignment instructions to understand how successful iterations of its component parts fit together to form the final product. This same sort of deconstructive approach features in literature on fostering students’ understanding of their assignments. Madigan (1985) suggests that instructors introduce students to the heuristic sentence “WRITERS RELATE MESSAGES to READERS by portraying the WORLD in WORDS” (p. 185), in which each capitalized word can be deconstructed to remind students of the functions that their writing should perform. Johns (1986) recommends that instructors teach students how to deconstruct their writing prompts by asking questions to uncover the function of each sentence. Clark (2005) recommends that instructors subject their

own sets of instructions to a genre analysis. The result, she suggests, is that instructors will become more aware of the hidden assumptions that underlie the instructions they present, and thus will be more likely to find ways to make these assumptions and expectations explicit and clear to their students.

2.2.2 — Detail in instructions

The ideal amount of information to be included in writing instructions is a contentious issue; research has shown that the provision of extensive detail can be both a boon and a bane for students. As discussed in section 2.1, increased instructional detail has been shown to benefit students in specific circumstances (Way, Joiner, & Seaman, 2000; Ferretti et al., 2000; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005). It has been argued that, without assignment designs that establish clear limits and guide students toward desired outcomes, underclassmen are particularly apt to develop ineffective strategies, to resort to mere summary of their sources, and to adopt a scope for their chosen topic that is too broad to be treated in appropriate depth within assignments' allotted length parameters (Doyle, 1983; Simon, 1988). Hobson (1998) likewise cautions instructors that a lack of specificity creates fertile ground for misinterpretation. However, numerous researchers have also associated an increased amount of detail with an increased amount of control and constraint placed on students (e.g., Horowitz, 1986; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Dirk, 2012).

Furthermore, a number of case studies have suggested that extensively detailed writing instructions are inimical to the cognitive processes that writing assignments seek to set in motion. In her observations of writing behaviours in an undergraduate sociology class, Nelson (1990) documented the response to students' complaints that their writing instructions for an

early assignment had not been explicit enough. When the instructor responded with more detailed instructions for the next assignment, some interviewed students expressed distaste for what they now saw as a checklist that appeared to initiate a paint-by-numbers writing process. They felt that their autonomy had been compromised. Other students seemed pleased—they felt that these instructions, in comparison with those for the previous assignment, established a shortcut to finishing the assignment. These interpretations stood in contrast with those of the instructor, who described the assignment as intellectually challenging, and who later indicated that most students' submitted work had failed to synthesize concepts in the way that had been intended. Nelson argues that extensively detailed instructions decrease students' engagement with the issue at hand, and thus decreases the extent to which students feel personally invested in their writing tasks.

While increased detail in writing instructions might clarify expectations for some students, it might be akin to a morass of unfamiliar concepts and postulates to others. The entanglements experienced by the latter group are what Macbeth (2006) calls “occult objects” (p. 189)—the tacit and often unknowable assumptions underlying assignment instructions. Learning to identify and understand these objects is part of the acculturation process undergone by any student integrating him or herself into an academic discipline, but Macbeth attests that certain students have palpable head starts. Writing from her perspective as an English for Academic Purposes instructor, she warns that increasing the specificity of instructions inevitably introduces more assumptions that novice writers must uncover and navigate. She further admonishes that it might lead students to adopt checklist approaches to their assignments, potentially leading students to believe that a learned response template is then applicable to similar-looking future assignments. Better, she suggests, is the use of repeated revision followed by class discussion, in

order to foster increased understanding of the purpose of a given genre, rather than simply the acquisition of process by which to produce. She contends that this approach will better equip students to adapt to future writing circumstances.

Instructors might understandably experience some cognitive dissonance in choosing how much or how little guidance to offer students when they create assignment instructions. Klotz (2001), a staunch critic of extensively detailed instructions, recounts that a survey with his composition students revealed that they, like the students Nelson (1990) observed, desired more information on their assignment sheets. In particular, a large percentage of respondents felt they would benefit from illustrative examples of the assigned style of writing as well as the provision of detailed grading criteria. In contrast, other students professed a desire for concise instructions. While this might be seen a reminder of the futility in attempting to please everyone, Klotz proposes the use of ‘levelled-instructions’—“[provide] different levels of detail for students and present these levels of detail as options, not requirements” (p. 63)—with the caveat that instructors must discuss with students the purpose of these documents and how to use them.

The debate over detail in writing instructions is a microcosm of the larger debate over the extent to which university students ought to be assisted in their learning. Schwilk (2010) demonstrated the efficacy of presenting writing instructions in an explicit, bulleted format, but wrestles with the loss of the contextualizing information of the traditional narrative format in the face of the obvious benefits of simplified, user-friendly material. He worries, as Nelson (1990) and Macbeth (2006) warned, that the advantages borne of expectations lain bare might be accompanied by the unintended consequence that students’ work is reduced to rote. Some might feel that this would discourage students from finding their own way and making their writing assignments their own, counter to academe’s valuation of critical thinking and intellectual

agency. Instructors must be judicious, then, when preparing writing instructions, taking care that the detail they provide is appropriate for their students and supportive of their assignments' intended learning outcomes.

2.3 — Issues to be Addressed

In 1990, Huot authored a meta-review of the research on writing instructions and writing assessment that had been conducted since 1975. He noted that the gamut of studies, with their often contradictory findings obtained from diverse writing contexts, did not offer enough reliable evidence enough to conclude that particular features of assignment instructions generally affect students' writing in consistent, significant ways. Twenty-five years on, the roughly 40 year history of writing instruction research is still a mixed bag. The lack of consistency in the results might owe, in part, to the considerable amount of variation in what researchers have examined under the labels 'prompts' and 'instructions.' The broad pattern, however, as seen in section 2.1, is that variations in prompt features have a negligible effect on holistic quality (e.g., Brossell & Ash, 1984; Brown, Hilgers, & Marsela, 1991; Breland, 2004), but frequently have noticeable effects on specific textual or discourse features in students' writing (Smith et al., 1985; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005; Hinkel, 2009).

At the time of this writing, there is no indication whether this broad pattern holds true for writing instructions in their full-length incarnation, the WAID. There is also no compelling reason to suppose that it might or might not hold true, since there has not yet been a systematic analysis of WAIDs to tell us whether they are simply inflated versions of writing prompts or something with a more diverse character¹⁵. Similarly, questions about the ideal amount and

¹⁵ Head and Eisenberg (2010) examined WAIDs in their totality, but only with the purpose of cataloguing the research advice they contained.

specificity of detail in writing instructions have not been examined with regard to instructions in the WAID format. Furthermore, there is also a paucity in the literature of students' own voices describing their experiences working with writing instructions in their courses; Nelson (1990) is a noteworthy but aging entry. This study addresses these gaps, in large part by asking of WAIDs many of the same questions that have been asked of prompts and nebulously defined 'writing instructions', but also by examining WAIDs in authentic classroom environments. It is concerned with the amount and types of information in WAIDs, students' affective responses to them, what students want to see in them, how instructors use them in the classroom, and whether variations in WAIDs might be associated with variations in students' writing performances. Finally, it is concerned with how WAIDs can be understood as a genre, and what such an understanding can reveal about how writing instructions function in their university course context.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Background and Analytical Framework

As we have seen in the previous chapter, scholarly accounts of WAIDs or their components seldom call upon their users—students and instructors—to highlight the experiential nuances that often bring forth vivid hue from otherwise plain lexicogrammatical data. Conversely, a comparable number of relevant publications offer only qualitative data or material-design advice. This thesis attempts to blend both approaches. In doing so, it requires a theoretical foothold from which texts and their features can be understood in relation with the people who create and use them to achieve ends within their shared spheres of activity. Indeed, WAIDs are presented to students in a social context (a course in a university setting), and are used to help address a perennial necessity—the need to evaluate students' abilities to synthesize or analyze information and demonstrate their knowledge and grasp of course material through writing.

The sociological notion of non-literary 'genre' put forth by the Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) intellectual tradition—a tradition prompted by Miller's (1984) characterization of genre as a typified form of social action arising in response to the exigencies of a recurring situation and embodied in a set of texts with similar features—provides a powerful theoretical lens for examining the role that WAIDs play in university courses, the factors that shape their development, the assumptions they convey about writing and the role of the writer, and the ends to which instructors use them. In this chapter, I trace the evolution of RGS, with a focus on the researchers and concepts that have most strongly guided this thesis. I begin in section 3.1.1 by exploring the foundational work on situation and exigence that led to the notion of genres as forms of social action. I then look at what the related concepts of intertextuality, the genre set, and the genre system offer in understanding the roles of genres in their contexts and social milieus. In 3.1.2, I look at the role that genre analysis can play in recognizing, understanding,

and learning about genres. In section 3.1.3 I discuss uptake, a concept central to understanding the ways in which genres interact and give rise to one another. I conclude the chapter with section 3.2, where I assemble the analytical framework that I use to guide my evaluation of my data.

3.1 — Theoretical Background

3.1.1 — Situation, exigence, and interconnectedness

RGS has its roots in the work of Lloyd Bitzer (1968) who, in his seminal article “The Rhetorical Situation,” emphasizes the importance of understanding one’s situation in order to use language effectively. A familiar example is the university student writing an essay for a course. The student is aware that the essay’s audience is the instructor, and that the instructor will grade the essay. In recognition of these circumstances, the student chooses language and modes of expression that purposefully differ from those used, for example, to write a note to a friend. Bitzer (1968) identifies three key constituents of this rhetorical situation that bear on how the student chooses to communicate: First, exigence—the recognition that something must be done or that something is in need of attention; second, audience—the entity to which the communicator attempts to effect change; and third, constraints—these can be situational (e.g., traditions, rules) or personal (e.g., knowledge, beliefs). In sum, Bitzer defines rhetorical situation as “the natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence that strongly invites utterance” (p. 5)

Bitzer’s (1968) work represented a turn in rhetorical theory toward situation-based understanding and analysis of texts. Patricia Bizzell built upon Bitzer’s foundations in an educational context with her 1982 article “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What we need

to know about writing.” Here, she draws a distinction between what she terms “inner-directed writing theorists” (represented by Flower and Hayes (1981) and their cognitive process theory of writing) and “outer-directed theorists”, who are “more interested in the social processes whereby language-learning and thinking capacities are shaped and used in particular communities” (p. 214). Rather than simply teaching writing by introducing a recursive process of planning, composing, and editing or teaching style from model essays, outer-directed theorists prefer that students be introduced to the conventions of particular discourse communities. The reasoning is that, beyond simply being able to address an intended audience, a writer who is versed in the discourse conventions of a particular community will be able to harness that discourse to make effective arguments and do intellectual work of significance in that community.

For Bizzell (1982), recognition and understanding of discourse community—groups who have become “accustomed to modifying each other’s reasoning and language use in certain ways” which eventually achieve “the status of conventions” and thereby bind the group (p. 214)—is central to the understanding of *why* writing occurs and why certain forms are preferred in certain contexts. She advocates this richer understanding of writing’s purpose, contrasting it with previous work in composition studies that simply focused on describing and cataloguing the textual features of prose types. Bizzell’s support for outer-directed writing theory and pedagogy was further expounded by Cooper’s (1986) ‘ecological model’ of writing, and her concern with the importance of discourse community found new applications in Swales’s (1990) landmark work *Genre Analysis*.

Our current understanding of genre as “the most socially constructivist of literacy concepts” (Johns, 2008, p. 238), owes largely to the work of Carolyn Miller. Her 1984 article “Genre as Social Action” merged the social and situational focuses of Bitzer and Bizzell in what

became a foundational and galvanizing document in rhetorical genre theory. Here, Miller argues for an understanding of genres as typified text-based responses to perceived recurrent situations. Bitzer (1968) had also pointed to the tendency for regular forms of responses to develop in response to recurrent situations, but Miller delves further into what she sees as a mediating effect between situation and response: Recurring situations give rise to repeated, typified responses, but these responses also come to affect the ways in which situations are perceived. The grocery list genre and medical form genre are familiar examples. In the case of the former, a list is developed by the shopper prior to visiting the grocery store in order to help manage the task of remembering and then finding a multitude of items. The use of the list then shapes the shopper's pattern of movement around the store, and leads the shopper to perceive the trip as one that is meant to take place in a sequence of steps. In the case of the latter, the medical form helps manage and routinize the need to record patient information and medical history, but also shapes the interaction between medical staff and patients by imposing structure on the comments and questions that are exchanged.

In essence, Miller argues for the tendency for situations to be socially constructed, in part because of the genres that become established for dealing with certain situations. These genres—these ways of acting—feed into our socially determined recognition of situations. Likewise, she reconceptualises Bitzer's notion of exigence as something socially negotiated rather than purely ontological. Miller contends that our ability to recognize exigencies is connected with our shared interpretations, acquired knowledge, and learned ways of acting.

The lasting legacy of Miller's (1984) "Genre as Social Action" is perhaps due in largest part to the final word of its title: Miller argues for an understanding of genres not solely as collections of forms and features (which she points out as reductive), but also as symbolic

actions whose meaning is tied to social context. This focus on pragmatism ahead of taxonomy stems from a sociological perspective of communication, and has had a major impact on the implications of genre knowledge for education and, more broadly, community membership and participation. In learning a genre, as Miller (1984) puts it:

we learn [...] not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have. We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potentials for failure and success in acting together (p.165).

Another novel and important tenet of Miller's (1984) reconceptualization of genre is her argument for the centrality of environment in understanding the actions genres help individuals produce, in what is termed an "ethnomethodological" approach (p. 155). In this sense, situation cannot simply be treated as a set of circumstances: recognition of place or setting is equally essential, for an environment may have a significant bearing on the reasons why or ways that situations arise therein. My research takes this into account—in my investigation of the use of WAIDs in two undergraduate courses, I made efforts to observe the location and class configuration of each. See Chapters Four and Five for more details.

Of the many researchers whose work Miller galvanized, Charles Bazerman is especially prominent for his significant contributions to RGS. Among Bazerman's (2004) most notable work is his conceptualization of intertextuality, which he defines as "the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts" (p. 86). Bazerman suggests that cultivating an awareness of intertextuality means becoming aware of the social and situational webs within which texts are entwined. Once they have done so, writers and users of texts are then better able to locate their own actions within systems of interaction and better able to position themselves within these systems to achieve their desired ends. Further, they may be better able to recognize the limits or possibilities of the texts available to them.

Likewise, analysts of texts may draw on notions of intertextuality as a way of understanding and explicating the genres and rhetorical stances adopted by writers. Its underlying assumption of connectedness may also help analysts recognize and define the expectations of the communities wherein texts operate. Intertextuality is central to a full understanding of WAIDs, because they are documents used for prompting or facilitating the production of other documents.

Bazerman is equally well-known for his work on the genre set¹⁶ and the genre system, which have contributed to theorists' understanding of the ways in which individual texts relate to larger arrays and hierarchies of textual forms and social contexts. His 2004 book chapter "Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems" defines a genre set as a "collection of types of texts someone in a particular role is likely to produce," and cites proposals, progress reports, and safety evaluations that a civil engineer is likely to produce as examples (p. 318). Above the plane of the genre set is the genre system, which encompasses "genre sets of people working together in an organized way, plus the patterned relations in the production, flow, and use of these documents" (p. 318). Bazerman illustrates how genre sets are embedded in genre systems with an example pertinent to this study: In a university course, an instructor's genre set might include the syllabus, lecture notes, writing-assignment instructions, grading rubrics, and even the computer document used to record students' grades. All of these texts correspond with the genre set used by the students in the course. These genre sets symbiotically exist within the genre system of the course, which itself is one of the genre systems in use within the university community. The genre system of a course might also include components of a university's administrative genre set—university policy statements in the course syllabus or the distribution of instructor evaluation forms during classtime are a few common examples.

¹⁶ The concept of the genre set was first introduced by Amy Devitt (1991) to refer to the collection of genres used by tax accountants. Bazerman (1994) later expanded on the concept.

Bazerman’s work has been instrumental in expanding the scope of early RGS theory, and his voice has been preeminent in calling attention to the intersections between genre theory and pedagogical practice. In a 1999 article advocating genre-based writing instruction, Bazerman counterbalances the priority RGS scholarship tends to place on situation and exigence (over textual taxonomy) in genre analysis: He notes that genre theorists *do* recognize the value of “momentary snapshots” of the ever-changing “landscape of available genres” and emphasizes the importance of knowing what range of genres are used in a given field at a given time and “what specific features regularly allow those genres to carry out their typical work” (p. 2). This corresponds with Miller’s (1984) provision that, in many cases, “classifications and distinctions based on form and substance” have been informative and useful (p. 155). In my effort to categorize the types of information contained in a corpus of WAIDs, I mean not to contend with RGS’s preference for characterizing genre according to situated purpose—indeed, my discussion of WAIDs in Chapter Five purposefully begins from this perspective—but rather to document the textual tools that are currently in use by the genre, and to explore the ends to which these tools are employed. Since no such documentation currently exists, I feel it necessary to take this step in the interests of contributing to a fuller understanding of WAIDs as a genre.

3.1.2 — Genre analysis

RGS frameworks frequently have been adopted to engage questions of pedagogy (Artemeva & Freedman, 2008). In particular, theorists have devoted significant research attention to fostering genre awareness in the classroom (e.g., Bawarshi, 2003; Johns 2008), developing students’ abilities to transfer genre knowledge from context to context (e.g., Bazerman, 2009; Gentil, 2011), and the value of genre-exploration as a learning tool (e.g.,

Beaufort & Williams, 2005; Devitt, Reiff, & Bawarshi, 2004). In a longitudinal study of one student's progression through his first-year college composition course to his experiences writing in the workplace post-graduation, Beaufort and Williams avow that novice writers would more easily develop comfort in varied writing situations and genres if they were to receive explicit genre-teaching in relation to the social contexts in which particular genres are used. As a teaching tool, the researchers recommend a genre analysis heuristic first introduced by Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi (2004). It is presented below in a condensed form (see Appendix A for the full heuristic):

1. Collect samples of the genre [...]
2. Identify the scene and describe the situation in which the genre is used [...]
3. Identify and describe patterns in the genre's features [...]
4. Analyze what these patterns reveal about the situation and scene [...] (p. 93-94)

These steps—and the detailed questions that Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi encourage an analyst to ask of a genre in completing each step—direct the analyst's attention back and forth between the genre's context and its textual features—its rhetorical action and its social action (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). They also encourage the analyst to consider how the characteristics and context of the genre position the writer in relation to his or her social setting and audience. The goal is to first develop 'scene awareness,' in order that an understanding of the purposes and appropriateness of a genre emerges from an understanding of its circumstances.

Though Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi's (2004) genre analysis heuristic was intended for pedagogy, it has a direct application to one of this study's major aims: understanding how WAIDs function in their classroom context. The above analytical tool fosters an inductive understanding of textual characteristics by first focusing attention on situations, the actions a text is used to accomplish within them, and the roles that the genre prescribes or encourages for its

users. Indeed, this context-first approach to genre is one of the calling card features of RGS, through which it distinguishes itself from other schools of genre study (Johns, 2008).

Bawarshi (2003) has already applied some of these strategies in his analysis of writing prompts. The following passage demonstrates the explanatory power of genre analysis, as Bawarshi thinks beyond the surface appearance of prompts to consider how they affect not only the behaviour but also the role-recognition of their users within the classroom situation:

To treat the writing prompt merely as a conduit for communicating a subject matter from the teacher to the student, a way of “giving” students something to write about, however, is to overlook the extent to which the prompt situates student writers within a genred site of action in which students acquire and negotiate desires, subjectivities, commitments, and relations before they begin to write. The writing prompt not only moves the student writer to action; it also cues the student writer to enact a certain kind of action (p. 127).

Through the use of genre analysis, I hope to discover similarly useful and revealing insights about the work that WAIDs do within their social context.

3.1.3 — Uptake

Anne Freedman’s 1994 article “Anyone for Tennis?” introduces the concept of uptake, which expands upon genre theory’s notions of situated exigence/response by invoking Bakhtin’s (1986) concepts of dialogism and utterance to explore the ways that genres play off of one another, or ‘take one another up,’ within systems of activity (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Uptake can be seen as a kind of re-envisioning of John L. Austin’s (1962) concept of the relationship between illocutionary force (what is implied in what is said) and perlocutionary force (things that happen as a result of what is said). Freedman uses tennis as a metaphor, and starts with the distinction between balls and shots: Shots are ‘played balls,’ the exchanging of which comes to have meaning within the context of a game. This is analogous to the exchange of texts in response to one another within a recognized context. Whether shot, text, or utterance, each act

prompts a response from its recipient. When the recipient understands the ‘rules of the game’ (or the context in which the exchange is occurring), he or she formulates an appropriate response.

This response is uptake.

For Freadman (1994), shots become meaningful in the context of the game, but games become meaningful in the context of their ceremonial—“the rules for the setting of a game” (p. 46). Tennis is the game, but a game with friends in the park belongs to a different ceremonial than a game between professionals at Wimbledon. The ceremonial determines the significance of the game, and thus the significance of the shots within the game. In much the same way, the way genres relate to one another differs depending upon the ceremonial in which they are used. For instance, the instructions (and other accompanying information) an instructor provides for an essay question on a final exam understandably differ from the information he or she provides for a term paper. Likewise, students’ uptake will differ. The shots appear similar—writing prompt, written response; the game appears similar—university course, essay writing; but the ceremonials are different, and thus neither the game nor shots are truly identical.

I had considered including Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of dialogism in my analytical framework—the interaction between an instructor providing a WAID for an assigned essay and a student producing an essay in response (alongside other related Bakhtinian utterances exchanged between parties before and after these two events) is dialogic, after all. Yet Freadman (1994) offers a similar set of tools. Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic relationship is paralleled by Freadman’s ‘pair of texts,’ which she notes is an ideal configuration for exploring how the genres of both texts work. She also notes that genres are often contrived to be taken up in particular ways—this certainly seems true of the WAID in the ‘WAID/student paper’ pair. These concepts are useful and appropriate for my research.

3.2 — Analytical Framework

Taken together as my theoretical framework, Miller's (1984) emphasis on situation and exigence, Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi's (2004) heuristic for genre analysis, Bazerman's (2004) concepts of intertextuality, and Freedman's (1994) concept of genre uptake will allow for a multi-tiered analysis of my data within the RGS tradition, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the work that WAIDs do within their social context, the assumptions they convey, their relationship with other texts within their context, and the responses they elicit.

As I first became curious about WAIDs, my familiarity with Miller's work helped me recognize that rhetorical genres are more than simply the sum of their textual parts. My recognizing this motivated me to ask questions not just about the content of WAIDs, but about why they feature the content they feature, and how this content both reflects and influences the setting in which these documents are used. This sensibility pervades in my discussion of the collected data—I work with Miller's notions to cast light on the social action that WAIDs enact, and how the demands of the situation in which WAIDs are used shapes the form they assume to accomplish this action.

If Miller's work is the theatre in which I view WAIDs, then Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi's genre analysis heuristic is the set of components which power the theatre. Their heuristic poses questions in an order which directs my focus first to the situation in which WAIDs are used (with consideration for the characteristics of the writers and readers who share this setting), then to the textual and informational characteristics of the genre, and finally to the connections between situation and content. The heuristic also encourages me to consider the roles that writers and readers (in this case, instructors and students) play in their shared situation, and the ways in which WAIDs are both influenced by these roles and serve to instantiate and reinforce them.

I use Bazerman's (2004) concept of intertextuality to extend my focus from WAIDs themselves to the action they attempt to accomplish. They seek to elicit, in response, a text from their readers—a writing assignment, which may belong to one of several academic genres. In this way, WAIDs and the writing assignments they give rise to are intertextual. The existence of this intertextual relationship is a main concern of this study, as I ask what features of WAIDs' design and use foster the health of their relationship with students' writing. In order to examine this, I must consider the quality of the uptake (i.e., the written assignments) that different WAIDs engender.

Chapter Four: Research Methods

After having my research proposal approved by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (see Appendix E for approval form), I collected and examined two types of data in separate but concurrent phases: (a) I compiled and analyzed a corpus of WAIDs used by instructors of second-year courses in this faculty, and (b) I conducted semi-structured interviews with the instructors and student-participants from two second-year courses in Carleton's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). Alongside this, I collected and analyzed both courses' WAIDs as well as each student-participant's completed end-of-term writing assignment. The following sections explain why I pursued these data, describe their sources and the conditions under which I collected them, and detail the methods I used to analyze them.

4.1 — Rationale

Operating on the assumption that writing assignments are likely to differ widely across disciplines (Arapoff-Cramer, 1971; Russell, 2002; Graves, 2010), I chose to narrow my research focus for RQ 1 to only those WAIDs used in FASS. I expected that courses in its departments would require similar types of writing—in particular, writing that involves research (Dirk, 2012; Head & Eisenberg, 2010; Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010). In order to facilitate making meaningful comparisons between WAIDs from different FASS courses, I further narrowed my focus to second-year courses (often referred to as 2000-level at Carleton). I based this decision on two factors: First, as a writing tutor with Carleton's Student Academic Success Centre, I have anecdotally observed that most of the students I assist are in their second or third year of study; second, that observation, coupled with my own experience as a liberal arts undergraduate, has led me to assume that most students of the humanities and social sciences probably face an

increase in both the number and rigor of writing assignments in the second year of their programs. This supposition is supported by a recent inventory of undergraduate writing assignments at another Ontario university (Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010). The corollary of this assumption is that the instructions provided for writing assignments take on increased importance for students as they encounter new requirements and raised expectations.

To maintain a consistent approach between RQ1 and RQ 2, RQ 3, and RQ 4, I chose to address the latter questions by investigating the writing experiences of students in two 2000-level courses belonging to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The two courses I selected belonged to different departments within FASS, but both featured end-of-term essays worth 25-30% of their total grade. It was my intention to collect interview data from courses in more than one discipline in the interest of increasing the generalizability of my findings.

4.2—Contributors to WAIDs Corpus

I accessed course syllabuses via Carleton's FASS website to compile a list of upcoming courses featuring end-of-term writing assignments. I then emailed the instructors of these courses (with a formal participant information letter attached) to ask whether they would be willing to share their instruction materials for those assignments. I made sure to contact at least one or two instructors from each FASS department, in hopes of compiling a corpus of WAIDs that would represent the faculty as a whole. I contacted 24 instructors in total. Once an instructor agreed to share materials, I visited him or her with a participant informed consent form to provide more information and to obtain his or her written consent to participate. In total, I received a WAID from each of eleven courses, representing eight different departments. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participating instructors, I have agreed not to name them, their courses, or the

departments that house them. It is important to note that having received eleven WAIDs does not mean my corpus contains only eleven documents. On the contrary, the majority of contributing instructors sent me several documents, in each case meant to be used in concert for one writing assignment. I discuss this in more depth in in the first part of Chapter Five.

4.3 — Participants

To become involved with courses from which I could obtain student participants for interviews, I emailed every instructor who was teaching a 2000-level FASS course during the semester in which I intended to collect data (34 instructors). I received interested replies from two instructors, from different departments. One course, hereafter referred to as Course A, was a full-year course. The other, hereafter referred to as Course B, was a regular one-semester course. I then arranged face-to-face meetings with each instructor (hereafter referred to as Instructor A and Instructor B), in order to further discuss my research goals and to present them with participant informed-consent forms. After I had obtained their signatures, I discussed dates on which I might visit their class sessions to introduce my research in hopes of recruiting student participants. I also informed the instructors that I was hoping to schedule interviews with them as well, in order to inquire about their goals and expectations for their end-of-term writing assignments. In addition, I explained that I was interested in observing any class sessions during which the writing assignment was going to be discussed.

I visited both classes several times to introduce myself to students and to distribute participant information sheets. I explained that I was hoping to conduct short interviews with them about their experiences working with the instructions they had received for their end-of-term essays. I emphasized my desire to conduct these interviews during the week leading up to

their essay submission deadlines. I also made an effort to emphasize my belief that their writing could benefit from taking the opportunity to reflect outwardly on the instructions with which they would be working. I received interested replies from five students in Course A and two students in Course B. These students all agreed to allow me to refer to them in this thesis using pseudonyms. Thus, let us refer to the participants from class A as Felix, Juanita, Nicole, Alec, and Melissa, and the participants from Course B as Edward and Steve. The participants from Course A ranged in age from 23 to 36, and were all either majoring or minoring in Course A's discipline.

4.4 — Interview Procedures

Upon meeting with each student participant, I first presented him or her with a participant informed-consent form, and spent a few minutes explaining what full participation would require—in the case of students, this meant allowing me to make an audio-recording of their interview, as well as granting me access to a copy of their graded final essay submission after their instructor submitted finalized course grades to the university. If students agreed to these terms, I then requested that they sign two copies of the informed-consent form—one for their keeping, and one for my records.

I started each interview by asking a series of demographic questions to determine age, major, and year of study, among other details. I then asked seven questions (see Appendix C for the question list) pertaining to the experiences students were having with the writing instructions they had received for their end-of-term assignment. I presented these seven questions in a semi-structured format (see Dornyei, 2007, p. 136), frequently pausing to probe for detail when I sensed that students had further valuable or interesting information to offer.

I also conducted two interviews with each instructor. I conducted and audio-recorded both interviews with Instructor A in person. I conducted both interviews with Instructor B via email. My purpose for the first interview was to inquire about their intentions giving the for the assignment (for instance, the skills they intended to foster or assess), and to have them characterize satisfactory and ideal responses. See Appendix D for the list of interview questions. My purpose for the second interview, which I conducted after the instructors had graded their students' essays, was to gather commentary on students' performances, and on the extent to which they felt that each participating student had understood the provided instructions and attended to them in writing. This second instructor-interview required that I reveal the identity of the student-participants, a condition of which all students had been informed and to which all had consented.

4.5 — Data Analysis

4.5.1 — Analytical technique

Smart (2008) differentiates "research methodology" from "research method" by pointing to research methodologies' fusion of "an underlying set of ideas about the nature of reality and knowledge" with research methods, which he describes as a "set of procedures for collecting and analysing data" (p.56). While the above sections detailed my research methods, here I describe how my decision to use Modified Grounded Theory analysis to interpret my data defines my research methodology.

Grounded Theory originated with sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the late 1960s, and represented a reaction to the increasingly entrenched position occupied by the positivist research tradition in the social sciences at that time. Glaser and Strauss feared that such

exclusive commitment to empiricism would result in stagnation, as work in the disciplines would favour the refinement of extant theories over attempts at producing new ones. Glaser and Strauss's publications on Grounded Theory sought to bolster the qualitative tradition by introducing what had until then been lacking: a full-fledged how-to guide for researchers to follow, constituted in their 1967 publication *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Their detailed suggestions for recursive data coding procedures and reflective writing throughout the coding process encouraged researchers to allow their theories to 'emerge' from the data itself, thereby 'grounding' their developing theories in the data. Grounded Theory's popularity spurred resurgence in the use and acceptance of qualitative research methods (Charmaz, 2006).

Modified Grounded Theory was introduced by Kathy Charmaz, and is most notably elucidated in her 2006 work *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. While maintaining Glaser and Strauss's principles regarding reflective writing and recursive data-grounded coding procedures, Charmaz diverges from traditional Grounded Theory in her assumptions about how knowledge is produced:

[...] neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices (p. 10).

This constructivist epistemological stance resonated with me when I designed this study because I knew that addressing my research questions would require me to investigate phenomena that cannot be objectively 'measured.' To wit, my criteria for determining a WAID's effectiveness at having its recipients understand and attend to the writing expectations of its distributor are: (a) how closely aligned students' expressed perceptions of their instructor's expectations are with the expectations that their instructors have identified to me, and (b) the extent to which these expectations have been addressed in students' submitted writing. My method for eliciting the

expressions required for Criterion 1 is the semi-structured interview, comprised of questions that I create. Thus, I am not an independent observer. This is not to say that I manipulated the conditions under which students received their instructions and wrote their essays, but I did construct the situations and materials through which I collected my data. Further, Criterion 2 depends largely on my judging whether students have (and if so, how effectively that they have done so) met their assignment's requirements in writing (though my approved access to their instructors' written feedback on their submitted assignments helped to corroborate my judgements).

My active role in my data's production and interpretation is undeniable. I am thereby aligned with the constructivist assumptions of Charmaz's (2006) Modified Grounded Theory methodological tradition. For this reason, her recommendations for coding textual data are well-suited to the nature of this project.

4.5.2—Analyzing the data

I analyzed each WAID using the Modified Grounded Theory coding and theme development techniques introduced in section 4.5.1: I read each WAID several times, drafting a list of codes to describe either what I believed to be the rhetorical purpose or function of a given sentence or section of information. I applied this approach recursively by using the codes I had developed from one WAID to inform my analysis of the next. I continued this process until I had analyzed every WAID and found no new codes emerging from repeated analyses. I then analysed my list of codes in order to look for cases of overlapping purpose or function. Upon my discovery of such cases, I merged the codes into 'themes,' and gave them thematic labels. These themes are discussed in Chapter 5. I also used Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi's (2004) heuristic for

Genre Analysis (see Appendix A for the complete heuristic) to help uncover the generic elements of the corpus. I applied this same analytic process to both student and instructor interviews. After transcribing the recorded interviews, I scrutinized each transcript for information pertinent to RQ 2, RQ 3, and RQ 4, and compiled these details. I then began a recursive coding process, followed by the merging of related codes into themes.

Once I had analysed the second interview with each instructor (in which we discussed students' writing performances and grades), I analysed the students' graded papers in order to look for instances in which they had either successfully attended to and enacted aspects of the instructions which the instructors had identified as being significant, or failed to do so (usually detectable by a note from the instructor indicating that something was missing or not enacted to satisfaction). I took notes on these instances to address RQ 2: What features of WAIDs can students be observed to attend to most frequently in their written work?

4.6 — Limitations

Two of this study's major sources of data—the corpus and the student-participants—limit the extent to which its findings can be generalized. In this section, I identify these limitations, specify whether they were purposeful or unintended, and consider the severity of their impact on my research goals. These issues are revisited in Chapter Six, where I consider how my methods and my assumptions shaped my analysis, and how alterations and extensions of my methods could have guide future research to target the questions that arise from my findings.

4.6.1 — Limitations of WAIDs corpus

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I limited my WAIDs corpus to only those materials

used in courses in FASS. I chose this narrowed focus to foster the manageability of the project—I worried that a corpus compiled from a wider range of faculties would require an exceptionally large number of entries before it could be treated as representative of the materials used at Carleton (or any university for that matter). Moreover, I believe that the types of assigned writing across faculties might differ significantly enough to affect the nature of their accompanying instructions. While it could be argued that WAIDs are used by instructors to address the same exigence regardless of discipline, in the interest of consistency I decided to only examine WAIDs from a faculty known for courses which traditionally assign research essays. It is also worth noting that my academic pursuits as an undergraduate have considerable overlap with disciplines contained in FASS. Consequently, I believe that I am better equipped to analyse instructions from, for example, English and Psychology courses (disciplines I have studied), than from Business and Engineering courses (disciplines I have not studied).

Nevertheless, this narrowed focus also limits my ability to make generalized statements about WAIDs across disciplines. A fuller inquiry into the nature of the information contained in WAIDs would certainly include documents from a wider range of disciplines. It would be especially interesting for such a study to make comparisons between the types of information that are typically provided for assignments in the hard sciences with the information commonly found in English literature WAIDs, for instance. In the case of this project, though, I seek only to make a start at characterizing these documents, not to provide a definitive university-wide account of them.

A related drawback to my corpus might be that it only contains documents from eleven courses. Even while focusing on WAIDs from just one university faculty, it could be argued that eleven WAIDs are too few to warrant generalizations about the materials used by the rest of the

instructors in that faculty. I take this potential critique seriously. In response, I wish to again emphasize that this research is exploratory: rather than attempting to provide definitive answers about the nature of all WAIDs, it intends to serve as a beginning point to what could develop into an ongoing, more thorough inquiry in the future. I revisit this matter in Chapter Six in light of my findings.

4.6.2 — Limitations of student-participants

My five student-participants from Course A and two from Course B represent further numerical limitations. Ideally, I would have had at least five participants from each course, but recruiting students proved challenging—especially so from Course B. Having interview data from just two of its students severely weakens my ability to generalize their experiences to the rest of the class, let alone to university students as a whole. It also diminishes my confidence in making comparisons between Course A and B. I bear this limitation in mind when I present my analyses in the next two chapters. It is also uncertain how typical the two courses were of those in related disciplines at the sophomore level, particularly in terms of their writing expectations.

Additionally, it is worth considering the difficulty in determining how ‘typical’ were my student participants. Many of the demographic questions I asked them were designed to identify personal factors that might have impacted their experiences with their final assignments, but it is impossible to know how much time each student invested in his or her writing—or, perhaps more importantly, how generally capable each student is as a writer. The best I can do is treat each student’s interview data and submitted essay as snapshots of that person writing in that particular course at that particular time.

A final drawback to note is that I was unable to interview students at the point in time I had originally desired. I had hoped to interview everyone as close to their assignment deadlines as possible, on the assumption that their experiences working with their writing instructions would be freshest in their minds at that point in time. Ultimately, participants' busy end-of-semester schedules resulted in some interviews taking place up to seven days beyond their essay due dates. Had I adhered to my original plan, I would have had even fewer available participants. While the arrangement was not ideal, it also would not have been guaranteed that every student would have been at the same stage in writing if all the interviews had been conducted one or two days before the deadline. Some might have been finished, some might have just been getting started, and some might have been at stages in between. As it turned out, each student I interviewed, whether before or after the submission date, had detailed recollections of his or her writing instructions. To aid their memories, I handed participants a copy of their assignment's WAID at the beginning of each interview.

Chapter Five: Findings

This chapter presents an analysis and discussion of my collected data, en route toward answers to my research questions and consideration of their practical implications. These research questions are: (1) beyond the writing prompt itself, what types of information frequently appear in WAIDs across curricula in Carleton's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences?; (2) what features of WAIDs can students be observed to attend to most frequently in their written work?; (3) what features of WAIDs are most effective in helping students produce the type and quality of writing desired by their instructors?; (4) in what classroom circumstances are WAIDs most effective in enhancing students' confidence, understanding of their assignment, and writing performance?

The first three sections of this chapter deal with WAIDs: section 5.1 is a textual analysis of my WAIDs corpus. It examines the diversity of forms in which writing-assignment instructions manifest. It also delineates and describes the categories of information found in the WAIDs corpus and reports the frequency with which they are present both within each WAID and across the entire body of texts. Section 5.2 looks at the WAIDs from the two courses I investigated to see how typical their information content is in comparison with the corpus. Section 5.3 merges the data from 5.1 and my observations of the two courses with RGS theory to show how WAIDs can be understood as a genre in the RGS tradition.

The next three sections turn toward the data collected from my student and instructor participants. Section 5.4 details how Instructor A and Instructor B characterized their goals for their writing assignments. I compare the statements they gave to me with the information they included in their WAIDs. Section 5.5 concerns my student interviews. I present the key themes that emerged from my analysis of their interview transcripts and look at how closely their

perceptions of the assignments aligned with their instructors' reported goals. Section 5.6 looks at students' submitted assignments, and section 5.7 addresses my follow-up interviews with Instructors A and B to examine the extent to which the students demonstrated recognition of their instructors' expectations within their actual writing.

The final two sections consolidate the content of the thesis up to that point: section 5.8 focuses on what answers can be put toward my research questions and considers the strengths and weaknesses of my data, while section 5.9 looks back at my data and findings to consider how they may have been shaped by my assumptions, my research questions, and my research design.

5.1 — WAIDs Corpus

5.1.1 — Format and length

My corpus of WAIDs consists of documents submitted from eleven instructors teaching second-year courses in Carleton University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The corpus contains 21 separate documents. Four of the instructors who submitted their materials were using one document¹⁷ to support their students' writing; five instructors were using two documents; one instructor was using three documents, and one instructor was using four. The combined word counts of the documents each instructor was using ranged from 410 to 3035, with a mean word count of 1622.54 ($SD = 876.47$)¹⁸. More documents did not necessarily mean more

¹⁷ In one of these cases, the instructor's assignment instructions were not presented in a standalone document, but occupied one page of the course's syllabus.

¹⁸ Some of the instructors from whom I collected materials had more than one writing assignment in their course. For such courses, I looked only at the final assignment, where possible. However, in some cases instructors used WAIDs specific to each writing assignment in conjunction with other documents intended to support all instances of student writing in the course. The statistics above count both distributed material which specifically addressed the final assignment *and* distributed material which was meant to have a more general purpose or to be used for each assignment.

information—in some cases single documents were lengthy (the longest single document contained 1574 words). The instruction material occupied two standard-sized pages or fewer in only three of eleven cases. In two instructors' cases, two of their distributed documents were PowerPoint files. In the only other study I am aware of in which statistics like these were collected, Head and Eisenberg (2010) reported that the 191 assignments 'handouts' they analyzed had a mean word count of 960 (p. 7), a figure 41% smaller than the mean of my corpus. That Head and Eisenberg limited their measurements to single documents might account for a large part of this disparity.

Taken together, these details of length and format from the corpus suggest that WAIDs rarely take the form of single 'assignment sheets' (a name by which they are often called). More often, the materials that instructors use to prompt and support their students' writing are an assemblage of documents, some on paper, some digital (and some that could be on paper *or* distributed digitally, such as Microsoft Word documents). The sample of WAIDs I have collected suggests that a given instructor's writing-support materials are likelier than chance to be spread across multiple documents and sometimes multiple media formats. See section 5.3.2 for further discussion.

5.1.2 — Categories of information found in WAIDs

The efficacy of a given set of writing-assignment instructions cannot be determined solely through statistical or taxonomical analysis of its informational content: instructors' perceptions of their students' needs surely influences what they chooses to include or exclude. Furthermore, textual documents are not the only way to communicate writing expectations to students. Informal classroom discussion and in-class writing workshops are two other familiar

methods of readying students for their assignments. Even so, cultivating an understanding of the range of types of information that appear in WAIDs could help an analyst or reader grasp what these documents do and provide a window onto the exigencies faced by the instructors who create them. Additionally, taxonomy of information types gathered from a large body of WAIDs could function as a measuring stick to help determine how ‘typical’ a given WAID is in comparison with all WAIDs, or with those in a particular discipline, faculty, or year of study. An analyst could then use such information to judge whether a given WAID contains more or less information than average¹⁹. Disseminating taxonomic information to instructors might increase their awareness of options in material design or make certain instructors cognizant of types of instructional information that they have neglected to consider. Likewise, disseminating this information to students might increase their awareness of what to look for in the instructions they receive, or alert them to useful information to have while they write, which might motivate them to consult their instructors to obtain such information.

In order to garner such taxonomic information, I used a Modified Grounded Theory analytical technique (Charmaz, 2006; see section 4.5 of this thesis). As Charmaz describes the technique, “qualitative codes take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data. As we code, we ask: which theoretical categories might these statements indicate?” (p. 45). Likewise, I conducted a close, deliberate reading of each document in my corpus and made notes about the rhetorical function of each sentence. As my list of function labels grew, I re-read the documents in order to sort sentences and paragraphs as specifically as possible. By the time no new labels

¹⁹ This statement is not meant to suggest that there is an ideal amount of information or level of detail that should be included in a WAID. Rather, being able to judge whether a particular WAID has more or less information than average might be useful in informing students’ or analysts’ decisions about whether further information is present elsewhere, and whether it ought to be sought.

emerged from my reading, I had established a list of five major purposes of the information of WAIDs, and a list of twelve specific types of information. These lists are presented below, followed by a detailed description of each of the twelve informational categories:

Five Major Purposes of the Information in WAIDs:

- Identify the document and the divisions of its contents
- Characterize the assignment and ideal iterations thereof or of its constituent parts
- State rules concerning submission, format, and acceptable types of sources
- Describe and explain how the assignment will be evaluated
- Offer advice on the process of completing the assignment.

Twelve Categories of Information Contained in WAIDs

- Headings and segmentation
- Rules and regulations
- Procedural guidelines
- Directions to resources
- Characterization of a good assignment or assignment component
- Writing prompts
- Writing or research advice
- Statement of purpose of assignment
- Expository information about assignment type
- Statements about evaluation
- Examples of assignment components
- Grading rubric

These twelve categories appear in WAIDs in the corpus with varying degrees of frequency—individual details are discussed in the sections that follow. The median number of categories per WAID across the corpus is eight ($M = 8.73$, $SD = 1.62$).

5.1.2.a — Headings and segmentation markers

Headings include document titles (found at the top of 100% of the documents²⁰ submitted to my corpus), which are either capitalized, underlined, centred, in boldface, or some combination of the four, and section titles, which are usually underlined, in boldface, or italics. Titles either name the assignment (e.g., “Critical Analysis of the New Citizenship Guide”) or name the document (e.g., “Essay Guidelines”). Section titles name sections of the document, alerting the reader to the type of information that will follow (e.g., “Expectations”). On first glance, these features indicate that their documents are not continuous narratives. They suggest that the information within, though presumably all pertinent to the document title, is meant to be digested in chunks.

Segmentation markers strengthen this suggestion²¹. Headings are segmentation markers unto themselves, but eight of eleven instructors who submitted materials to the corpus also used bulleted or numbered lists in their texts. These are used any time more than one prompt is offered, but are also used to break instructions into steps. This formatting decision implies that

²⁰ Instructors submitted their materials to me as email attachments, so it was easy to differentiate one document from another. However, in a classroom situation, two or more instruction documents could be distributed at once. In such cases, I assume students would rely on titles to determine whether the pages they receive are meant to be viewed as a single document or viewed separately. This could be important when one document is meant for a specific purpose (e.g., a particular assignment) and when another is meant for a general purpose (e.g., an APA style guide intended for use with all writing assignments in a course).

²¹ A related feature is the frequent use of boldface throughout WAIDs to highlight words or phrases within sentences, or full sentences themselves. Once again, the implication seems to be that some details are meant to be paid special consideration. A representative example from the corpus is: “Answer **one** of the following questions.”

instructors intend their assignment instructions to be read carefully and followed carefully, in the same manner as an assembly manual for furniture or a software installation guide.

5.1.2.b — Rules and regulations

Rules and regulations are generally found at the beginning of instructional documents. They take the form of imperatives addressing details such as when the assignment is due, how it should be submitted, how the text should be formatted, what style(s) of citation and referencing should be used, how long the assignment should be, what sorts of sources are acceptable or unacceptable, how many sources should be referenced, and so on. One example from the corpus informs students that “the essay is due at noon on 18 November 2013. No essay is accepted after the established deadline without penalty and no essay is accepted after 6 December 2013.” A document from another course instructs its user that “you are expected to find *at least five* relevant books and/or articles to serve as the basis of your paper.” All eleven instructors who contributed to the corpus included rules and regulations in their WAIDs.

5.1.2.c — Procedural guidelines

Procedural guidelines outline what the instructor expects the student to do in the assignment (or what to do to complete the assignment). An example from the corpus reads “The essay will consist of a critical analysis of the ideas raised in one of 10 selected TED talks [...]. Once you have selected one of the talks, then you are to compare the information learned in the course with the ideas presented in the talk.” A document from another course includes a list of steps to follow in order to complete the assignment. The function of procedural guidelines is very

close to the function of prompts, though my definition of a prompt, as stated in section 1.1, is ‘questions or topic statements that initiate a written response.’ In the example given above, students are not expected to respond *to* that statement directly. Rather, the statement describes a procedure that the students are expected to follow. The WAID I have quoted does not in fact include any prompts that match my definition. Its procedural guidelines function as a *de facto* prompt. However, it is possible for a WAID to have both prompts and procedural guidelines. Consider, for example, a list of statements or questions—these are prompts—that initiate a written response, preceded by the sentence, ‘please write an essay in response to one of the following statements or questions.’ This preceding sentence, then, is a procedural guideline. All eleven instructors who contributed to my corpus included procedural guidelines in their WAIDs.

5.1.2.d — Directions to resources

This type of information is quite specific. It either names sources or resources that students can consult, or provides instructions on how to access recommended sources or resources. This ranges from the names of books and articles to the names of websites and online databases to other forms of media that might be applicable to the assignment. Some of the documents in my corpus contain URLs, which can either be typed or clicked directly if the student accesses the document in a digital format. All eleven instructors included directions to resources in their WAIDs.

5.1.2.e — Characterizations of a good response or assignment component

Characterizations of a good response or assignment component inform students about what constitutes an ideal—or at least fully satisfactory—piece of writing. This information may

pertain to the entire assignment or to specific aspects or sections of it. An example from the corpus reads: “Typically, such papers will have clear thematic direction, a well-marked unfolding of an argument, and they will employ a critical vocabulary requisite to the forceful presentation of ideas. They should be instruments in literary problem solving, make use of secondary sources in an integrated way, and employ standard practices in documentation.” An example targeting a more specific assignment component reads: “This section should contain a more complete statement of the problem that is to be investigated than can be given in the title.” These examples might seem similar to procedural guidelines, but note that they lack imperative language. Consider the first example: had it read “adopt a clear thematic direction,” I would have argued that it should be classified as a procedural guideline. Instead, it functions as a suggestion. Ten of eleven instructors included this category of information in their WAIDs (91%).

5.1.2.f— Prompts

Prompts are questions or topic statements that initiate a written response. Examples from the corpus that match this definition include: “What do you think is the most significant form of alienation explored by Marx in the texts we have read? Explain how Marx describes it, and why you see it as significant”; “We are all consumers, but what type of consumer are we? There is a story behind everything that we buy. Many of these items have stories that we might prefer not to know about. In this exercise, you are to conduct an inventory of your room or apartment and map where they are produced²²”; “Spenser adopts an allegorical method of story-telling. What are its characteristics and conventions? What reading strategies are necessary to ferret out all its meanings?”

²² The final sentence of this prompt takes the form of a procedural guideline.

In section 1.2, I explained that one of my assumptions underlying RQ 1 is that prompts are a sort of nucleus around which other details in a WAID orbit. My corpus challenges this assumption: just eight of eleven (73%) instructors included prompts (that suit my above definition) in the instruction materials they shared with me. It could be argued that my definition is too narrow or exacting. Perhaps another analyst would argue that my definition of procedural guidelines ('what the instructor expects the student to do in the assignment or to complete the assignment') is too broad, and that its first clause ought to be included in my definition of prompt²³. However, I modeled my definition of prompt after Kroll and Reid (1994)—“a stimulus for the student to respond to” (p. 231)—and it tracks closely with the examples of prompts used throughout the literature (e.g., Kroll & Reid, 1994; Hobson, 1998; Horowitz, 1987; Oliver, 1995; Way, Joiner, & Seaman, 2000). Rather than make semantic rearrangements, I would prefer to follow the data and rework my initial assumption: It now seems that rules and regulations and procedural guidelines—which were included by 100% of the instructors who submitted material—form the nuclei of WAIDs. ‘True’ prompts, when they are present, always appear alongside procedural guidelines. To distill a WAID to its purest essence, a *reductio ad absurdum* approach would dictate that procedural guidelines are the one indispensable element; all other categories of information²⁴ would have little meaning or applicable context without them.

²³ A rebuttal I would levy, though relayed anecdotally to me in my student interviews, is that some assignments require students to select their own topic. Consider this (fabricated) statement: ‘Choose a topic from the list of course readings and thoughtfully critique its central argument’ It *does* prompt its reader to action, but the stimulus to which the student responds is the course reading, not the foregoing statement. The foregoing statement is a procedural guideline.

²⁴ For example, imagine the usefulness of rules and regulations without procedural guidelines. They would be apropos of nothing. Similarly, writing or research advice without accompanying procedural guidelines would require the reader to find his or her own purpose to which to apply it.

5.1.2.g — Expository information about assignment type

This type of information explicates the defining characteristics of the requested form of writing. For example, one WAID from the corpus corresponding to a literature review assignment contains the following: “A literature review is a document that summarises research on a particular topic. A literature review does not seek to undertake primary academic research. A literature review is used to summarise past and current academic research on a topic. It can also point out weaknesses and strengths within the body of literature being reviewed.” Another WAID informs students that a critical analysis is an “in-depth comparison of the similarities and differences between the ideas presented and what you have learned.” This category could be seen as similar to Characterizations of a Good Response/Component. Indeed, it has a similar function, but takes the form of description rather than suggestion. Seven of eleven instructors included this sort of expository information in their WAIDs (64%).

5.1.2.h — Writing or research advice

Writing or research advice, I contend, can be considered surplus to the information that is essential to complete an assignment. Instead, it is intended to help students profit from their writing or research experience, or to ease the difficulty they might experience during the process. One example from the corpus reminds students to “keep in mind that you are writing about the research [...] about the articles or other sources you have found.” From a document used in another course: “Ben Jonson recommended rereading your work many times as you write it. Not a bad idea. Go over your work asking as many different questions of it as you can concerning clarity of argumentation, consistency of presentation, originality of ideas, diversity of secondary materials, accuracy in the reading of the original, strength and particularity of vocabulary, and

more. Lead a pure life.” A third course’s document, in reference to the research its students were expected to do, informs them that “[...] some academic writing can be very difficult to understand (even for professional researchers). If the piece in question doesn’t become clear after two readings, find another piece on the same topic that is more clearly written.” Seven of eleven instructors included writing or research advice in their WAIDs (64%).

5.1.2.i — Statement of purpose for assignment

Statements of assignment purpose indicate to students why the instructor has assigned the particular task, or what the instructor intends students to learn or achieve by completing the assignment. An example from the corpus reads: “The overall goal of this assignment is to lay the groundwork for the final paper.” Another states that the purpose of the course’s writing assignment is “to acquire and improve writing skills relating to literature, argumentation, research techniques, and the conventions relating to the presentation of scholarly writing in general.” Six of eleven instructors included statements of purpose in their WAIDs (55%).

5.1.2.j — Statements about evaluation

Statements about evaluation have a similar purpose to that of grading rubrics, but are not presented in the typical grading rubric format. An example from the corpus reads “Grades will not be based on technical and aesthetic expertise but rather on how well—and imaginatively—you reflect an understanding of the photograph’s original function and technique.” Another document contains this statement: “Performance on the content will determine the initial grade level as follows: A = excellence; B = very good; C= good; D = needs work; F = inadequate. Performance on style and format (although less so) will determine whether the initial grade is in

+ (plus) range (e.g., C+) or in – (minus) range (e.g., C-).” The first example is more general than the types of information that are commonly found in rubrics. It identifies what the instructor values most in students’ work. The second example functions like a rubric, but is less detailed and is not presented in typical rubric format. Nevertheless, it also offers an indication of how the instructor intends to value different aspects of students’ responses. Five of eleven instructors included statements about evaluation in their WAIDs (45%).

5.1.2.k — List of assignment components

This type of information is similar to the above category. The two categories may be amalgamated in a list where each item is accompanied by a characterization of an ideal iteration, or the list may simply be presented in point-form with few or no clarifying details. In the latter case, the list functions like a checklist. Alternatively, rather than characterizations of good component iterations, the list may include actual examples of those components or directions to examples (e.g., a sample abstract, or a URL leading to a sample APA style references page). Five of eleven instructors included a list of assignment components in their WAIDs (45%). Notably, one instructor distributed an assignment checklist as a document separate from other writing instructions, and required students to staple it to their paper for submission once they had checked every box.

5.1.2.l — Grading rubrics

Grading rubrics tend to be presented as a graphic or a table. They usually exemplify or describe gradations within evaluative categories relevant to their assignment. For instance, a grading rubric table might contain separate rows for A-through-F letter grades (or percentages or

points), overlaid with columns naming the components of the assignment that the instructor will separately evaluate. It is common for each cell in the table to characterize a performance on a particular component that would warrant a specified letter grade or percentage grade (such as 4/5 or 80%). This is what Leahy (2002) calls a ‘primary trait analysis.’ Rather than containing full-sentences, the cells in rubric tables generally contain point-form descriptive statements, such as “offers a nuanced, insightful, compelling argument”. Four of eleven instructors included grading rubrics in their WAIDs (36%), the very same figure obtained in Head and Eisenberg’s (2010) analysis of a much larger corpus of assignment instructions.

5.2 — WAIDs from Course A and Course B

5.2.1 — Course A

The assignment I investigated from Course A was labeled ‘Essay Two.’ It was the last essay students would write for the course apart from an essay component in the final exam. The instructor provided the students with one two-page instruction document containing 772 words, a word count nearly one full standard deviation ($SD = 876.47$) below the corpus mean of 1622.54. It contained the following five categories of information: headings and segmentation markers, rules and regulations, procedural guidelines, directions to resources, and eight prompts plus the option for students to choose their own topic. Each prompt related to texts that students had read during the course. The prompts occupied the majority of the WAID’s two pages. The WAID’s five categories of information were more than two standard deviations below the corpus average ($M = 8.73$, $SD = 1.62$), but four of its five categories ranked among the five most frequently occurring in the corpus²⁵ (prompts occur sixth most frequently). Overall, Course A’s WAID was

²⁵ See Appendix B for a list of the information categories organized by frequency of their occurrence in the corpus.

noticeably shorter than others in both word count and in the types of information it contained.

In its linguistic tenor, Essay Two's WAID is authoritative and to-the-point. Students are instructed to "Write an academic research essay that considers one of the texts studied on or after June 20th." It then calls for a six-page paper which should "have a tightly focused thesis statement, should use specific examples from the primary text(s) in question, and should demonstrate your ability to analyze a literary text using the literary terms studied in lecture." Students are informed that they are required to use two secondary sources pertaining to their chosen texts but are then admonished: "Do not use more than two secondary sources." Following that, the WAID briefly reminds students of the expected MLA formatting conventions and directs them to two MLA resources before listing the prompts from which students are to choose.

5.2.2 — Course B

The assignment I investigated from Course B was labeled 'Final Essay.' It was the last piece of work students would complete in the course (there was no final exam). The instructor provided the students with a one-page instruction document, containing 389 words (nearly one-and-a-half standard deviations below the corpus mean of 1622.54, and lower than the shortest set of instructions [410 words] in the corpus). Like Course A's WAID, it contained five categories of information. Four were the same as Course A's categories, with the only difference being that writing advice was provided rather than directions to resources. The categories were: headings and segmentation markers, rules and regulations, procedural guidelines, writing advice, and eight prompts plus the option for students to choose their own topic. As with the prompts in Course A's WAID, these prompts also related to topics that had been studied during the course. Once again, these five categories of information were more than two standard deviations below the

corpus average ($M = 8.73$, $SD = 1.62$). However, four of its five categories of information ranked among the five most frequently occurring information categories in the corpus (writing advice ranks seventh). Overall, Course B's WAID was noticeably less detailed than what the corpus suggests is the norm for second year courses in FASS.

Despite the statistical similarities, the linguistic tenor of Course B's WAID is noticeably different from that of Course A's. It invites consultation: "If you are having trouble finding a suitable topic, I will do my best to try to help you to develop a project"; It uses idiomatic language: "If you have another topic in mind that doesn't reflect topics derived from these lectures, please *run them by me* in advance [emphasis mine]; It concludes with an amiable entreaty to its readership: "Please, if you are able to, try to have fun with this assignment as you engage with your chosen topic. I hope that you enjoy your research and writing process, everyone!" The WAID's open, informal tone seems to match the open nature of the assignment. Students are asked to "choose any topic or theme covered in class and develop a focused research essay²⁶ on that topic." While a list of nine prompts follows this statement, they are labeled as "topic suggestions," rather than required options. Students are also permitted choice in formatting and citation style: "Please use either MLA, APA, or Chicago style citations, and please try to stay consistent with your citation style."

5.3 — WAIDs as a Genre

Readers of this thesis who have spent time in a university classroom will doubtless recognize the setting and situations in which WAIDs are used. A rudimentary understanding of the situated activity that WAIDs perform makes it easy to quickly recognize WAIDs as a genre

²⁶ This WAID did not offer a description or characterization of what constitutes a 'focused research essay'

according to the RGS tradition. I could see that myself when I began designing this study. However, at the beginning of Chapter Three I indicated that my working definition of genre in this thesis would be ‘texts with typified features given shape by the exigencies of recurring situations.’ In this section, I intend to unpack that definition in light of what has been reported in sections 5.1 and 5.2. I draw on the work of Miller (1984), Bawarshi (2003), Bazerman (2004), and Devitt, Reiff, and Bawawshi (2004) to help examine (a) what the features of WAIDs suggest about the recurring demands of their social context, (b) the subjectivities in which WAIDs position their creators and audience, and (c) how WAIDs establish connections with things that have come before and are yet to come in their courses, as well as with texts that exist outside of their course’s genre system. The goal is to move beyond the obvious toward a rich, nuanced characterization of WAIDs as a rhetorical genre.

5.3.1 — The size and shape of WAIDs

My corpus demonstrates the difficulty in developing adequate yet user-friendly nomenclature for the collection of documents that are often used in support of a particular writing assignment in a university course. Seven of eleven instructors who submitted materials used more than one document to support their assignment. In all seven cases, this collection of documents included one document which performs the role commonly attributed to the ‘assignment sheet²⁷,’ and in all cases this central document contained these categories of information: headings and segmentation markers, rules and regulations, and procedural guidelines (often accompanied by prompts). This cluster of the frequently occurring information

²⁷ The common conception: to inform students of what they are expected to write. Or, as Bawarshi (2003) puts it before demonstrating the shortcomings of this common conception, “a way of ‘giving’ students something to write about” (p. 127).

categories in binds together all other categories of information, whether they appear in the central document or in separate documents; it gives them purpose and applicability, in the same way that procedural guidelines give applicability to rules and regulations. While one could refer to the central document as ‘the WAID’ and to other separate-but-related documents as ‘supplements,’ I take the view that the collaborative function of these documents in their classroom context takes precedence over mundane details (such as whether an instructor chose to staple two sheets or merge two .doc files). This view permits an understanding of separate-but-related documents as being one unified WAID. I have used the term in this spirit throughout this report, and will use it from this point onward to refer to (a) the instruction documents from courses A and B, (b) postulations of hypothetical sets of writing instructions, and (c) any of the materials belonging to a specific course’s assignment in my corpus.

5.3.2 — The relationship between content and context

It is evident that WAIDs are used in pedagogical settings to inform students about the writing they are expected to produce and submit. Their titles, rules and regulations, and procedural guidelines make this clear. However, applying Reiff, Devitt, and Bawarshi’s (2004) genre analysis heuristic (see Appendix A) to WAIDs sheds further light on the ways in which their design and informational content reflects the demands to which these texts respond and the specific contexts they serve. This mode of analysis also suggests that the text-formatting and language found in WAIDs constructs the subjectivities of their users by establishing or reinforcing social roles within the classroom setting and by prescribing the agency (as thinkers and writers) and amount of autonomy that is afforded to students. The emerging picture is of a

cyclical relationship between context and content: context shapes content, and content then sets further context for the action which is to occur²⁸.

5.3.2.a — Design

As described in section 5.1.2, WAIDs have a characteristic look and design, instantiated through the use of titles, section headings, and frequent segmentation of textual items. Ten of eleven WAIDs in my corpus (as well as the WAIDs from course A and course B) have a heading at the top of the document identifying the course to which they belong. This indicates the standalone nature of WAIDs—they are distributed separately and used separately from other course documents. The identifying information is presumably an acknowledgment of the many documents students receive, and thus aids filing purposes. The one WAID whose instructions were not directly preceded by such information was the one which was incorporated in its courses' syllabus. The syllabus itself, of course, featured this information at its top. All WAIDs in the corpus, including the aforementioned, included an easy-to-identify title for their assignment.

Section headings in WAIDs call attention to the different types of information in the documents. They seem to guide the reader through the information sequentially, perhaps indicating a desire on the part of instructors that students read the information carefully, or perhaps betraying worry that students might devote too little attention to an unsegmented block of text. A representative example from the corpus of WAIDs includes the following section headings: Topics, Style, Length and Other Requirements, Support, Due Date and How to Hand It In, and Evaluation and Feedback.

²⁸ This same cycle has implications for the intertextual nature of WAIDs, discussed in section 5.3.3.

Segmentation often takes the form of bulleted or numbered lists. In the WAID mentioned above, the section labeled Length and Other Requirements contains the following numbered list:

1. Length [...]
2. A bibliography is required [...]
3. A dubious source must be identified [...]
4. A glossary is required [...]

This list functions like a checklist—a set of items which must be included in the written response. Research supports the notion that explicit lists increase students’ task recognition (Schwilk, 2010) in comparison with narrative presentation. The frequent use of segmentation in my corpus suggests that instructors are intent on having their students process details and steps sequentially. Segmentation also occurs when prompts are listed, though these instances do not imply a need for sequencing or a checklist approach; they are simply a display of options from which students may choose.

Another notable instance of text-formatting in WAIDs is the use of underlining, boldface, all-caps, different coloured letters, or italics within sentences. A representative example, the final sentence from a prompt in course A’s WAID, reads “Focusing on **one** text, analyze how such claims are made.” Another example from the corpus reads “A literature review **does not** seek to undertake primary academic research.” A third case, again from the corpus: “Communicate the chosen issue/debate and a tentative thesis statement to your instructor via email **by Nov. 25 at the latest.**” Like the use of headings and segmentation, this type of formatting serves to affect the way the readers process information. In the three above examples, the writer appears to be drawing the reader’s attention to discrete details, rather than entire sections or sentences. One might speculate that these formatting decisions are the result of previous instances in which students overlooked, misunderstood, or ignored the number of texts they were expected to consider, the purpose of a literature review, or the final date for assignment submission.

Taken together, the design of WAIDs suggests that they are documents meant to be read carefully. Moreover, their creators appear to have taken steps in order to facilitate careful reading, in anticipation of points of confusion. Instructors who deliver a course year after year might adapt their WAIDs in response to feedback or difficulties and misunderstandings they have observed in their students²⁹. They might also adapt the nature of their assignments in response to these same issues, which would necessitate an adaptation of the accompanying WAIDs as well.

5.3.2.b — Language in WAIDs

My analysis of the corpus indicates that language used in WAIDs is typically formal, particularly when used to transmit the following categories of information: rules and regulations, procedural guidelines, prompts, statements about evaluation (including grading rubrics), expository information about the assignment type, and examples of assignment components. In these sections of WAIDs, the instructor adopts an authoritative voice. Sentences addressing these issues tend to be short, direct and imperative, as illustrated by the following selection of passages from across the corpus:

a. A term paper must set up an argument to be debated according to critical methods and problematic investigation. A good paper will not only build upon an informed background, but will look at qualities of data, whether from the text itself, or from the critical writing around that text, according to the principles of logic, inference, and computation.

b. As part of this assignment, you also must write a short statement (1-2 pages or 250-500 words) explaining your updated photograph.

²⁹ Head and Eisenberg (2010) suggest that the WAIDs used by long-time instructors are likely to better address student needs than those used by instructors with less experience, citing evidence that “that handouts are modified and keep growing in size and scope with each year they are put to use in the classroom” (p. 11).

c. A literature review does not seek to undertake primary academic research. A literature review is used to summarise past and current academic research on a topic.

d. Your research question must be related to themes discussed in class.

e. At least one source needs to come from the course readings or additional readings.

f. You are to choose a work of art from between 1800 and 1900 and write an essay examining the work in its social context.

The instructor's position as decree-issuer is instantiated through imperative diction, as seen in examples *a*, *b*, *d*, and *e* with the use the words 'must' and the phrase 'needs to.' Example *f* might be perceived as slightly gentler, though decidedly unambiguous in its expectations of the student. Example *C* is expository rather than imperative, but similarly direct in its description of the assigned genre. Less commonly, instructions are presented as suggestions, as seen below:

g. For your essay, you are invited to investigate in more detail one of the texts, authors, or themes from the course syllabus. Other topics are possible but must be approved by me beforehand.

h. You should be presenting an argument, and I'll expect you to be able to articulate clearly what you're arguing, and to lay out the reasons your reader should agree with your argument.

Throughout the corpus I observed statements like the second sentence in example *g*. Students were often granted latitude to choose their own assignment topics (outside of the offered options), but it was always stipulated that the instructor's assent would first be required.

The prevalence of imperative language in WAIDs suggests that instructors assume the role of an authority figure when they write assignment instructions. Presumably, when students read these instructions, they likewise recognize that authority is being asserted, and recognize that they must assume a role of deference if they hope to receive a desirable grade for their writing. While students are doubtless aware of the instructor-student power relationship in the

university course setting, the distribution of WAIDs is sometimes one of the first (and certainly one of the most significant, due to the often high-stakes nature of university writing assignments) instances during a course in which this relationship is actualized. Upon receiving the WAID for an upcoming assignment, students become aware of the need to begin the writing process and become cognizant that their instructor has certain expectations of them. Roles are thus brought into focus and thereafter assumed.

The corpus indicates that not all of the language typical of WAIDs is imperative, however. When WAIDs contain writing or research advice, as seven of eleven in the corpus do, the tone of their language tends to shift toward informality. In these cases, instructors often characterize their advice as reminders, suggestions, or helpful hints, as illustrated in the following corpus excerpts:

- i.* Remember that the assignment is NOT the conventional essay on the topic, but rather a critical review of four pieces of scholarship that deal with the topic.
- j.* Remember that the depth of your research as well as clarity of language, grammar and spelling will be taken into account in grading.
- k.* Keep in mind that some academic writing can be very difficult to understand (even for professional researchers).
- l.* Many people are excited to have the writing process complete. However, once your last sentence is finished, it is far from over.
- m.* Creating an outline of your essay has proven to be helpful for many people, and useful in arranging ideas and arguments.
- n.* It may be useful to take notes on the resources you find that will be most effective for your essay, ensuring to include the source in your notes.
- o.* Do not select a topic simply because you think the professor is interested in that – or present arguments that you think the professor endorses. A good professor grades your paper according to its quality and not the specific arguments presented in it.

p. A professor can tell how much effort has been invested in a paper just by reading it. In examples *i* through *n*, instructors appear to shift into the role of mentor, offering guidance rather than administering charges. In contrast with the authoritarian guise seen before, this supportive and advisory positioning is probably closer to the role that instructors assume during their usual interactions with students in classroom sessions or one-on-one meetings.

However, as evidenced by examples *o* and *p*, even while giving advice, instructors appear compelled by the situation to reinvokethe power relationship that is otherwise tacitly understood by students as they prepare and submit written work to be graded. The evaluative exigence that gives rise to both the WAID and the submitted assignment presumably urges the instructor to adopt this stance. The intent of the advice is benevolent, but its presentation nevertheless calls upon the reader's latent recognition that he or she would be wise to use the advice, since it is coming from the person who is going to assign that reader a grade.

5.3.2.c — How WAIDs situate students

The above excerpts from the corpus show that WAIDs typically position instructors as authority figures and consequently position students in subordinate roles, dependent upon their instructors' regulations and provisions of permissible ideologies and creative latitude. Though the prevalence of imperative language might lead one to conclude that WAIDs are simply vessels for sets of rules and restrictions that students must follow, a minority of WAIDs in the corpus indicate that some instructors make a point of addressing and encouraging student ingenuity. In these cases, instructors characterize students' ability to find, interpret, and produce ideas and information as central to successful completion of the assignment. The following four passages

from the corpus acknowledge and nurture student agency and perspicacity in different ways and to different extents, while also tempering these qualities with either plain or hidden caveats:

q. Trust your own insight and smarts, and every time you want to turn to the internet instead turn back to the primary text, or contact me or one of the TAs for help.

r. The thesis is open—I cannot tell you how to think on your own about literature—but there are many critical themes and approaches upon which it may be based from allegory to narrative, including approaches to character, symbolism, myth, medieval or Renaissance social issues, literary genres, and much more.

s. Take the attitude that you are a smart, capable person who has something to say and an internally motivated reason for being in school, taking this class and, thus, for writing this paper.

t. How do you plan to approach the question? Do you support a particular viewpoint, as presented in the background section? Do you propose to study the question from a particular theoretical position? Do you plan to use the work of a specific scholar in examining the question? Do you propose to use a case study as a means of exploring a particular idea or theory? What do you plan on arguing?

Example *q* encourages the reader to rely on his or her own acumen. The student is empowered as a researcher, thinker, and writer, but within imposed limits: the internet is cast as an undesirable resource and is contrasted with the primary text, which is venerated through virtue of the comparison. The instructor and the course's TAs are portrayed as suitable alternatives to the primary text. In this way, student agency is encouraged but within clearly defined limits. While one analyst might perceive an insinuation that students are not judicious enough to weigh the worth of internet sources, another might perceive an attempt to keep students within manageable bounds in order to ease evaluation. Example *r* has a similar bent, informing students of their freedom to develop their own opinions on their chosen piece of literature while also steering toward familiar modes of interpretation that might help students develop focused narratives in their writing.

From a student perspective, example *s* might be the most empowering passage in the corpus. The instructor encourages students to embrace their own abilities and motivations, and in doing so makes known to students his or her interest in how they will put forth their unique perspectives in academic inquiry. However, an alternative, cynical construal might focus on the instructor's exhortation that students "take the attitude" that they are smart and capable (rather than simply reminding students that they *are* smart and capable). This line of thinking might lead an analyst to wonder whether the instructor truly values students' erudition and capacity for insight, or whether he or she simply hopes or wishes that students would approach the task *as if* they possess these qualities.

Example *t* stands out in the corpus as the passage containing the largest cluster of questions. These questions intend to assist students in getting started with the writing process, and have heuristic value in helping students situate their voices and arguments alongside those occupying an identifiable position in the discipline or with respect to a particular issue. This passage is predicated on student agency, and encourages student autonomy in the writing process by making its readers aware of the amount of choice available to them. However, it is unlikely that the instructor would treat 'no' as an equally desirable alternative to 'yes' in response to questions such as "do you support a particular viewpoint, as presented in the background section?" or "do you plan to use the work of a specific scholar in examining the question?" The choice available to students, then, is not meant to be between 'yes' and 'no', but between the many options that follow from 'yes.' This passage fosters student independence, but also directs students' attention to research choices and rhetorical strategies that are esteemed within the academic community. It thereby impresses upon students, through gentler means than simply laying out commandments, ways of knowledge-making that are valued by the discipline.

Every WAID in the corpus allows for *some* student agency. While little choice tends to be afforded for rhetorical stance and paper length, students are typically able to choose the subject matter they write about (often from a list of provided options or from issues investigated in the course) and in the sources they use to support their writing. However, the four excerpts discussed above are unique in their candid treatment of student ingenuity; within WAIDs, the overwhelming tendency is toward a treatment of students as being in need of direct instruction, reigning-in, and guidance through the research and writing process. It is worth noting here, once again, that the corpus is composed of WAIDs from second-year courses. The imposed constraints in this selection of documents might reflect instructors' desires to introduce acceptable practices for enacting genres of writing that, in many cases, are likely new to sophomore students. Simultaneously, the constraints placed upon these assignments might facilitate instructors' grading processes and help students avoid entanglements with abstruse or tangential subject matter, or with sources that they might not yet be equipped to properly evaluate.

5.3.3 — Intertextuality

Bazerman (2004) defines intertextuality as “the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts” (p. 86). Intertextuality is not fundamental to a text's classification as a genre, but the presence of intertextual connections within a genre tend to be of great interest to genre scholars—these connections are often the cause of or result of the work that texts do within their social contexts. WAIDs are intertextual by nature, because their purpose is to elicit an uptake (the writing of papers—another text—for course credit) and assist students in managing the uptake. In this way, WAIDs are part of the

genre system of the university classroom. They tend to function as intermediaries between the material explored in the course and the writing that students produce in response to that material. They often include discussions of and direct references to texts that have been studied or texts intended to stimulate students' formation of an argument or response.

Analysis of the corpus shows that WAIDs are also intertextual in other ways. In each of the following passages, one of two types of connections is drawn: between the subject matter of the current assignment and other assignments in the course (examples *v* and *w*), or between the requirements of the current assignment and resources that might be of assistance in the writing and research process (*x* and *y*):

v. The overall goal of this assignment is to lay the groundwork for the final term paper³⁰.

w. You should be starting work on this now. You've been working on your practicum placement for two months now so you should be able to do much of your final report and your poster right now.

x. For finding other relevant references based on key words, please consult the CBCA Complete database on Carleton library's website (select Databases, go to the letter 'C', then select CBCA, and insert key words for your paper).

y. For general guidelines on essay writing, citation of sources, etc., please see the 'Essay Guidelines' on cuLearn.

Example *v* identifies a future assignment, "the final term paper", and makes students aware that the present task, though evaluated as a stand-alone component of the final grade, is the first step in a process that will ultimately be completed by semester's end. This statement draws a connection between the texts that students will produce and, in doing so, gives students a sense

³⁰ As mentioned in section 4.2, one criterion for a to be WAIDs included in my corpus was that it had to correspond to an end-of-term writing assignment in its course. Example *v* clearly comes from a WAID which does not meet this requirement. At the time of data collection, the instructor who submitted this WAID had not yet prepared the instruction document for that course's final term paper. Because I received fewer submissions than I had hoped for, I decided to disregard the end-of-term requirement in order to include this WAID. This decision has proven fortuitous—example *v* is a noteworthy case of intertextuality.

of both the scaffolded nature of the coursework and the relative importance of their current and final papers. Example *w* does much the same, but from the perspective of already having laid the foundations for the final assignment. The instructor's use of the word 'so' in the second sentence indicates that the knowledge and experience that students have accrued during their practicum placement should readily transfer to a complementary pair of final assignments. Both of these examples show how WAIDs can function as instruments that help to unify tasks within the course.

Examples *x* and *y* represent a different sort of intertextuality: Example *x* points students to an online database through which texts relevant to the assignment may be discovered. In this way, the WAID becomes a conduit between the material used in the course and related resources in other places. Example *y* points students to another document, presumably also created by the instructor, which is evidently intended to assist all assigned writing in the course³¹. When students use the document from which the excerpt was taken alongside the document the excerpt prompts them to consult, these texts (and any others that might be relevant to the writing assignment, but that are available or distributed separately) form a conglomerate that functions as a unit, similar to the many categories of information in WAIDs, as I described in section 5.3.1.

Taken together, these diverse forms of intertextuality suggest that a central purpose of WAIDs is to serve as a bridge between what has been learned (or what has already been written in the course), what has been published that pertains to it, what resources are available to support research and writing about it, and what will be written about it. This combines with their role as a shot in a series of exchanges between instructor and student—one of the most formalized ways in which they communicate to show WAIDs as a dynamic genre that, despite its multifarious

³¹ The course from which example *y* was drawn included four writing assignments.

appearances, does important work in tying together activities and texts in the university classroom.

5.4 — Instructor Interviews

In this section and in section 5.5, I discuss interview data that pertains to RQ 2, RQ 3, and RQ 4. Here, I focus on information that emerged from my interviews with Instructor A and Instructor B.

I interviewed the instructors separately—a face to face interview with Instructor A and an interview via email with Instructor B. The purpose of these interviews was to establish a baseline of intention against which to compare students' perceptions of what they were being asked to do with Assignment A and Assignment B. I consider it necessary to be able to make this sort of comparison, since WAIDs are one of the primary ways that assignment expectations are communicated, and determining the effectiveness of WAIDs would, in part, involve determining how well instructions have been transmitted from instructor to student.

5.4.1 — Instructor A

When asked about the writing goals for Essay Two, the final assignment in Course A, Instructor A reported that developing a strong thesis statement, tactfully integrating secondary sources, and clearly organizing ideas were crucial to successful completion of the task:

I think that a really key part of this is the work of, well there's two things here—I think it's really important for students to be able to take a mass of information and to succinctly state some kind of argument and so often I find theses as you do I'm sure in the writing centre, theses that are not theses...that have no argument to the core, right, and so I want them to be able to do that. And I think that is a widely useful skill, and then I also want them to be able to read bodies of complex material and paraphrase, I want them to be able to do that, and I want them to be able to organize ideas effectively.

Instructor A also described goals for Essay Two that related more closely to the subject matter of Course A:

I really hope that [the students] come away feeling that they understand something about the genre they're writing about, whether it be a novel or a poem or a free verse poem or a metered poem or what have you ... [as well as] ... the literary movement or the period that they're writing about, and I want them to have a sense of what it means to analyze a literary passage.

It should be noted that two of the composition goals mentioned by Instructor A (developing a strong thesis and incorporating secondary sources) are directly stated in the first paragraph of Essay Two's WAID. The same paragraph also states that one of the assignment's requirements is to use specific examples from the primary text to which the student is responding (which was not mentioned in the interview), as well as that students are expected to demonstrate their ability to analyze literary texts by using the literary terms that were studied during class sessions (which was mentioned in the above interview quotation).

In addition to describing goals for Essay Two, Instructor A mentioned that Course A was designated as a 'Writing Attentive' course in its department. In these courses, as Instructor A explained it, students are required to:

[...] write one exam, [...] write a number of formal essays [...] in which they're expected to do the following: develop a thesis, develop complex ideas using correct and effective expression according to academic English practice, develop literary reading skills through close analysis of poetry and prose passages, use and cite evidence from primary texts appropriately, and develop secondary research and citation skills.

Instructor A then elaborated, clarifying that the emphasis of Writing Attentive courses is on learning outcomes rather than the processes students might follow to achieve those outcomes. This means that it is left to instructors to decide how best to design their course material in order to realize their departments' stated goals. Instructor A approached the task by incorporating four writing and research workshops into scheduled class time. These workshops separately dealt

with the writing and disciplinary skills quoted on the previous page (i.e., grammar and punctuation, developing a thesis statement, locating secondary sources, quoting and paraphrasing), and were scheduled to precede the four writing assignments required in the course. These assignments were themselves designed to build upon one another, progressing from lower-stakes to higher-stakes, with all of the above-mentioned skills needing to be put to use in Essay Two.

After speaking with Instructor A and learning about the writing workshops, I asked permission to attend the course's final workshop. This workshop took place shortly after students had received the WAID for Essay Two. To prepare for the workshop, Instructor A requested that each student select an essay topic from the eight provided on the WAID³² and develop a sample body paragraph that included ideas from a secondary source. These sample paragraphs were exchanged and peer-edited during the session. At the beginning of the workshop, Instructor A distributed to students graded copies of an earlier assignment (an annotated bibliography of sources pertaining to a chosen topic for Essay Two) and discussed some of the strengths and weaknesses of students' efforts. Instructor A contextualized the returned assignment and subsequent feedback by reminding students that "everything leading up to essay deadline is a building block."

The focus of the workshop then shifted to the development of body paragraphs. Instructor A explained that an effective body paragraph establishes a point, furnishes it with evidence, and then expounds upon the importance of the connection between the point and the main topic. Via PowerPoint slides, the students explored several examples of effective and ineffective body paragraphs. Following this, the discussion addressed appropriate use of secondary sources in

³² A ninth option allowed students to develop their own topic, conditional on instructor approval.

essays. Instructor A encouraged students to use these sources either to augment their arguments or to introduce debate, with the caveat that it is preferable to paraphrase ideas from these texts rather than to quote them directly. The workshop ended with students exchanging their sample body paragraphs and discussing them in pairs. As Instructor A summed up for me during our interview:

The larger question in the research workshop is [...] ‘what is the discipline I’m working in and what are the kinds of secondary sources that are appropriate for [this kind of essay], and what kinds of things am I doing in [this kind of essay].’

5.4.2 — Instructor B

In an email interview, Instructor B reported the following writing goals for Course B’s ‘Final Essay’:

I hope that the students learn about professionalism in presenting academic essays through proper research and elevated writing style. I also hope that [they] will rigorously and passionately pursue a topic that they have chosen based on their own interest from the vast backdrop of [the material explored in the course].

When asked what features would characterize an excellent response to this assignment from an assessment standpoint, Instructor B explained that:

An excellent paper is well-written, clear, concise, organized, and presents a topic that is representative of issues and questions within the field of study. It is easy to tell when an author is enthused about his or her topic because that enthusiasm engages the reader and inspires the author to pursue more and more research to augment their enthusiasm. Clear and organized writing is very important as the reader needs to know exactly what the author intends and how the topic will be broken down. Essays without a clear thesis always land in the D range. Essays with a clear thesis are B and up! [Having a] clear thesis, then, is crucial!

In Course B’s syllabus, Instructor B listed “[the development of] improved writing skills to better articulate the data/questions/issues extracted from course readings and discussions” as one of the courses ‘core competencies.’ Unlike Course A, however, Course B was not designated

as ‘Writing Attentive,’ and no class time was formally identified by the instructor or by the syllabus as being devoted to exploring this goal. Course B’s ‘Final Essay’ was its second writing assignment—an unrelated reading response assignment was due three weeks prior. Additionally, Instructor B’s stated goals that students organize their work, write clearly, and develop a clear thesis, are not reflected in the content of the WAID for the final essay.

5.5 — Student Interviews

As described in section 4.4, interviews with participating students from Course A and Course B were conducted face to face within a week³³ of the due date of their final writing assignments. I refer to the students from Course A by the pseudonyms Felix, Alec, Juanita, Melissa, and Nicole, and from Course B by the pseudonyms Steve and Edward. In this section, I explore the emergent themes from my discussions with students from Course A first and Course B second. The full list of questions I asked to student participants can be found in Appendix C.

5.5.1 — Course A

When asked “what do you think are your instructor’s intentions for this writing assignment?” participants from Course A related fairly accurate representations of Instructor A’s goals for Essay Two. The responses listed here were prompted only by the above-quoted question. These were first reactions, and did not result from follow-up questions or any commentary I supplied.

Alec – “To evaluate how well we’re able to analyze a given text.”

Felix – “To have us develop a thesis in relation to [the] question, to prove this with evidence from the primary texts as well as the secondary sources, and to write a cohesive,

³³ Up to a week before or a week after the due date. Four of the seven interviews were conducted after the due date.

well-written paper.”

Juanita – “[The instructor] wants a very strong thesis and [...]”³⁴ wants arguments, evidence to prove the thesis.”

Melissa – “To get people used to the whole research process, what qualifies as a good article or a good source that you can use for a paper, as well as trying to show how you can be effective in a small amount of space that’s allotted.”

Nicole – “Working on incorporating secondary sources and research skills and methods into developing an essay and following an argument.

While it was only Felix who immediately cited all three intentions for the assignment that Instructor A had mentioned to me in our interview (developing a strong thesis statement, incorporating secondary sources, organizing ideas clearly), each participant identified at least one goal that had been mentioned either in the WAID or in the writing workshop that I attended (which was attended by all participants from Course A). With the exception of Nicole, every participant had identified at least three distinct goals for the assignment by the time our interviews concluded. Since there was some discrepancy between the goals Instructor A reported to me and those stated in the WAID (organization was not mentioned in the WAID; using examples from the chosen primary text was not mentioned in the interview), the comprehensive responses from student participants suggest that the instructor’s goals were clearly communicated through a combination of information in the WAID and information delivered in classroom discussion.

When asked whether any components of the provided assignment instructions had been emphasized above others, participant responses indicated a consensus:

³⁴ To the greatest extent possible, I have tried to quote students verbatim. However, in the case of the ellipses above and other cases to follow, I have removed mentions of the participating instructors’ names and all referent gender pronouns.

Alec – [The instructor] “really drilled in that we’re supposed to be using these secondary sources.”

Felix – [The instructor] “emphasized the use of research considerations and of proof in our learning on our workshop we talked about using sources and this differs from our previous essay in that one didn’t require secondary sources so this one is more focused on providing proof for your thesis and your arguments.”

Juanita – [The instructor] “wants us not only to prove our thesis through evidence that we found in the texts but also by supporting material from third parties, so literary journals, books, etc.

Melissa – “There was a discussion about secondary sources” [in class].

Nicole – “The integrating of the secondary sources into the work effectively” [was emphasized above other components of the instructions].

As mentioned in section 5.4, the class writing workshop I attended focused, in part, on the use of secondary sources in the body of an essay. It is interesting that students feel that the use of secondary sources was the most emphasized aspect of the instructions for Essay Two—this issue did not garner the lion’s share of the discussion in the workshop; paragraph and essay body organization received as much or more attention. Perhaps secondary sources had been discussed on numerous other occasions. Perhaps the requirement of their inclusion was salient since the previous essay required only the use of primary sources. The data—Felix’s quote in particular—suggest this, but the answer is not clear.

Three of Course A’s five participants pointed to the writing workshop as the most effective and helpful facet of the instructions they received for Essay Two. When asked whether a particular element of the instructions in the WAID had been especially helpful in his writing process, Felix redirected the focus of my attention:

The instruction sheet should be considered in coordination with the writing workshop [that was held] for this paper. So yeah, we definitely, it’s not on this sheet here but in class we spoke about the idea of the simple formula of a sentence, and then proof and then yeah...how we should structure our paragraphs was covered in class.

When I mentioned to Felix that I had attended the workshop, he elaborated:

That was helpful in the sense that it was different from the previous essay and it gave us an idea of the format in which [the instructor] wanted to see this and also how [the instructor] was hoping to see the sources used as far as primary sources being quotations being from the text directly and the secondary stuff used in broader terms.

Melissa and Nicole shared similar sentiments:

Melissa: I particularly liked in this class how the professor has dedicated days that are outlined on the syllabus, like you come in and ‘I want you to have an intro paragraph.’ You don’t have to use that intro paragraph in your paper, but it’s supposed to be on the topic that you’re writing your paper on, so that if you want to use it you can.

Nicole: She did put a lot of emphasis on the secondary sources and then she had a workshop on it which was very well run through [...]. The workshop was helpful in analyzing the secondary sources.

For their part, Alec and Juanita repeatedly mentioned their private discussions with Instructor A when asked about helpful aspects of the instructions. It seems that all five students viewed Essay Two’s WAID as either a supplement or a lead-in to interpersonal discussion which, by all indications, had the bigger influence on their experiences with the assignment. These attitudes are similar to those expressed by student participants in a series of case studies by Nelson (1990), in which students were also asked to speak about how their instructors’ assignment instructions factored in to their writing processes (see pp. 375-377).

The consistency of Course A’s participant responses could be considered a theme unto itself in the interview data. No one felt that the instructions for the assignment were confusing or unclear. No one singled out any particular aspect of the provided instructions that he or she wished had received more attention in class discussions. The emergent picture is of a group of participants who had attended class, closely listened, carefully read, and thoroughly

understood³⁵. There *is* reason to wonder whether this was true of all students in Course A—Melissa mentioned that some of her classmates were confused about a detail on the WAID stating that dictionaries and the course reader would not be counted toward the imposed limit of two secondary sources—but this minor point does not provide sufficient grounds to speculate about comprehension among the rest of the class. What is clear is that the participants recognized what their instructor expected of them.

5.5.2 — Course B

When asked what they thought their instructors' intentions were for Course B's final essay, the two participants Edward and Steve gave markedly different answers:

Edward – “I think [the instructor] wanted us to have fun with it and [...] really left a lot of it open to us, even topic-wise, [and] wanted us to pick something that we'd enjoy writing about and that we're interested in. And I think that's a good way to go about it because you end up being more enthusiastic about it and learning more.”

Steve – “[The instructor] wants us to write 8-10 pages on a topic of our choice, and it has to be related to Tibetan Buddhism or Buddhism in the west, and [the instructor] said it's worth 30% of our mark.”

I asked Steve whether the instructor had discussed any broader learning goals for the assignment. He told me that there had not been any discussion of purpose or rhetorical strategy; there had just presentation and discussion of the topics. Speculating on the assignment's purpose, Steve surmised that having students write an essay about a topic from newly covered material would take care of an evaluative need, since the instructor hadn't tested the class on the material they

³⁵ These students' willingness to participate in this study perhaps indicates that they shared a high level of interest in their course. While this could mean that they were not representative of other students in the course, it seems likely that motivated students are more likely than others to be affected by the instructions they receive, due to their higher levels of interest and attentiveness. Conversely, students with low levels of motivation might be affected by neither exemplary nor deficient WAIDs.

had been recently studying. As our conversation progressed toward his choice among the topics listed on the WAID, Steve recalled that Instructor B “kept suggesting ideas” in class, and conjectured that the instructor might have had a vested interest in certain subject selections:

Steve – “[The instructor] kept suggesting things you could write about or that [the instructor] doesn’t particularly know about and [...] wants to find out about, so like you can do the research for [the instructor] and at the same time you’re doing your final essay I guess.”

Edward’s comments did not corroborate Steve’s utilitarian impression of the assignment’s purpose. Later in our interview, Edward reiterated his above-quoted statement about having fun with the essay, avowing that the instructor “really emphasized picking something you’d enjoy writing about. That was the main thing for sure.” While they both indicated that they had attended every class during which the final essay was discussed³⁶, Steve and Edward’s perceptions³⁷ of the assignment did not seem to align with the expectations that Instructor B had delineated for me in his email.

Despite this disjunction with their instructor, Steve and Edward both expressed confidence in their chosen essay topics and their understandings of the instructions. When asked whether anything about the instructions seemed unclear or confusing, they both replied in the negative:

Edward – “I thought it was actually more than what he needed to put on the instructions. They were very thorough³⁸.”

³⁶ Steve reported that Instructor B “spent like 20 minutes” in class discussing the instructions after distributing that WAID and “10 minutes in a previous lecture as well just talking about [the assignment].”

³⁷ Edward’s comments did, however, reflect the exhortation in Course B’s WAID to “try to have fun with this assignment as you engage with your chosen topic.”

³⁸ This comment is noteworthy since Course B’s WAID was markedly sparser than Course A’s and all eleven WAIDs in my corpus. Edward considered the WAID helpful because “[in other courses] we were never really given a paper version of our guidelines. It was always maybe verbal or maybe a couple sentences online or somewhere.” Edward’s major was Computer Science, a program housed not in FASS—the home of Courses A and B and all those which contributed to the WAIDs corpus—but in Carleton’s Faculty of Science. Anecdotal though it is,

Steve – “I wouldn’t say I find anything confusing in the instructions. [The instructor] was very specific as to, like, [...] 8-10 pages, double spaced. About the citations, [the instructor] said you have to cite your sources.”

Furthermore, both participants were pleased by the ‘openness’ of the assignment. Steve, an Engineering major who had selected Course B as an elective, explained that most assignments in his program come with strict topic and formatting restrictions. He said that he normally prefers these constraints because they can facilitate the writing and research processes (“You know what you’re supposed to write about and you know where to go to look for it”), but that this is a unique situation: I prefer [the openness of the assignment] right now because I’m free and I have the time to do my research and delve into it.” Edward, in contrast, indicated that he always prefers being able to choose among many topics, “It’s a lot better I think. You have more to write about because you’re interested in it. I find it’s more dry, the writing, if you’re defined and narrowed down to a certain aspect.” In sum, both Edward and Steve expressed confidence in their understanding of the instructions and enthusiasm about their freedom to choose their subject matter.

5.5.3 — Extraneous themes from interviews

In the two preceding sections, I limited my discussion of participant responses to comments and themes pertinent to RQ 3 (What features of WAIDs are most effective in helping students produce the type and quality of writing desired by their instructors?) and RQ 4 (In what classroom circumstances are WAIDs most effective in enhancing students’ confidence,

Edward’s remark is reminiscent of Hobson’s (1998) account of the often sparse assignment instructions he observed being used in a pharmacy faculty. It suggests differences in writing instructions (and perhaps assignments themselves) across disciplines and lends credence to my decision to limit this project’s focus to one faculty.

understanding of the assignment, and writing performance?). Many more themes emerged from my analysis of the interview transcripts, however. Aside from what has been discussed above, the two next-most frequently occurring themes were participants' tendencies to (a) compare their assignments in question with assignments from other classes (in the same discipline and in other disciplines) and to (b) pontificate about the nature of writing in various disciplines. These comments were unfailingly interesting, though they generally had more to do with subject matter and rhetorical strategies than they did with writing *instructions*. I note these details here because my line of questioning fortuitously led to these remarks, and I note them also for posterity. The students had plenty to say about disciplinary conventions and expectations, which suggests that these topics might constitute fertile ground for future inquiry.

5.6 — Submitted Student Writing

My purpose for collecting and reviewing students' essays was to look for signs in their writing of uptake of assignment information, in order to address RQ 2 and RQ 3. I had originally reasoned that, in a large enough sample, this mode of analysis would indicate which types of instructions were most frequently taken up in submitted assignments. Having established that, I would then consider all provided instructions in conjunction with the presentation method of those instructions (i.e., presented in the WAID, presented orally in class, or presented another way—this is the main concern of RQ 4) to determine whether there appeared to be any ideal combinations. Unfortunately, with only seven student-participants in this study, my analysis of their essays has failed to turn up any noteworthy patterns in this regard.

All seven students, to varying degrees of success, took up every task that was asked of them in their essays and showed signs of attending to all categories of information present in

each WAID. In Course A's case, I think this owes in part to the extensive preparation (particularly the writing workshops) described by the participants, in part to the far-below-corpus-average number of information categories in the WAID, and in part to the moderate number of discrete tasks³⁹ identified in the WAID. In Course B's case, I think this owes, again, in part to the far-below-corpus-average number of information categories in the WAID, and in part to the small number of discrete tasks identified in the WAID.

As described earlier, Course B's WAID was notable for its parsimony in length. It is similarly spartan in the number of tasks it requires: it asks students to choose one topic, write eight to ten pages, choose a preferred citation style and use it consistently, develop a focused research essay, and have fun researching and writing about the topic. My analysis of Edward's and Steve's papers shows that they both successfully completed the first two tasks. Steve was more successful than Edward in 'developing a focused research essay,' though I lack evidence indicating whether they did or did not recognize this as a task and, if they did, whether they subsequently tried to address it. I charitably assume that both students did both. Edward had trouble crystallizing an identifiable argument in his writing, however. It is difficult to measure the amount of fun that Edward and Steve might or might not have had during their writing processes, but during our interviews both students seemed enthusiastic about their chosen topics as well as the open nature of the assignment, as noted in the previous section.

At the end of section 5.4, I mentioned that Instructor B had expressed to me that he hoped students would organize their work, write clearly, and develop a clear thesis. I pointed out in that section that these goals were not mentioned in the WAID for Course B's final essay, though they

³⁹ I use the term 'discrete task' to identify what Schwilk (2010) called 'explicit tasks'—things that must be attended to individually in order to successfully complete an assignment. Schwilk cites "select a topic from a list of suggested themes" and "read scholarly sources" as examples of discrete tasks from a set of writing instructions (p. 9).

were obliquely referenced as ‘core competencies’ of the course in its syllabus. The WAID instructs students to ‘develop a focused research essay,’ but it is unclear whether this expectation was explicated in class discussions or via any other informational format. As cited before, Steve said in his interview that the instructor did not discuss writing strategies or expectations. The only task-oriented discussion that Edward recalled addressed the importance of properly citing sources. With only two participants from whom to gather these sorts of details, I cannot make confident conclusions about what might or might not have been discussed in class.

From Edward’s and Steve’s reports, though, it does not seem that these expectations of style, organization, and argument were communicated clearly; at the least, they were not emphasized as primary concerns. Nonetheless, Instructor B’s comments on Steve’s paper reveal that Steve’s performance was deemed impressive, with a comment directed in particular towards his thorough analysis of his topic. Edward did not fare as well. Instructor B’s comments attribute his low grade to improper citation⁴⁰, absence of a thesis, and failure to write in a formal academic style.

Neither student specialized in the humanities or social sciences, where writing has been shown to be assigned more frequently than other disciplines (Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010). Both had selected Course B as an elective. While each student indicated in his interview that he had written approximately ten papers in his university career up to that point, it is possible that their separate experiences had led them to develop different levels of familiarity with common expectations in university essays. It might be considered unfair, however, to expect a student to suppose on his or her own that the instruction “develop a focused research essay” equates with ‘have a clear argument encapsulated in a thesis statement.’ This would presumably have to be

⁴⁰ Edward recognized and took up the task of citing his sources through the consistent use of a recognized citation system. Edward attempted to cite his sources using MLA conventions, but he made numerous formatting errors.

communicated directly in order to be taken up in writing. It is unclear whether or not students in Course B received this instruction.

For Course A's Essay Two, students were expected to complete eight discrete tasks: choose one topic, write six pages, use MLA format and citation style, develop a strong thesis statement, quote from their chosen primary text, integrate two secondary sources, clearly organize their ideas, and use literary terminology. The first seven tasks were mentioned in the WAID. The eighth was brought up to me by Instructor A in our interview, but was neither mentioned in the WAID nor addressed in the writing workshop I attended. Nevertheless, all five student-participants from Course A took up all eight tasks in their submitted writing assignments. Of course, as in Course B, they did so to varying degrees of success, but their recognition of their instructors' expectations indicates that the lines of communication in Course A were sound.

5.7 — Follow-up Interviews with Instructors

After reviewing students' submitted assignments, I intended to conduct follow-up interviews with Instructor A and Instructor B to check whether my impressions about students' performances had been correct and to gather any other information that the instructors felt might have been pertinent to the writing students produced. I spoke with Instructor A in person, but I was unable to reach Instructor B for comment. Fortunately, however, both Edward and Steve sent me graded copies of their essays⁴¹ containing Instructor B's feedback. These comments

⁴¹ I did not require students to share their graded essays with me—I only required that student-participants permit me to view their submitted writing after their instructor had submitted final grades for the course to the university. This stipulation was in place to ensure that my research activities would not have an effect on the grades students received for their assignments. As it turned out, some students shared graded copies of their assignments with me, while others shared ungraded copies. Instructor B had requested that students submit their assignments for grading via email, after which point they were emailed back to students with marks and comments. Steve and Edward shared these graded documents with me.

proved to be suitable for my objectives—they have informed my assessment, in the previous section, of Edward and Steve’s uptake of their assignment’s tasks and expectations.

Instructor A spoke to me at length about each student’s effort in his or her assignment, and confirmed my impression that each student had made at least a perfunctory attempt at addressing the expectations that had been laid out in the WAID and in classroom discussion. Instructor A’s most significant comment related to the low grade that Nicole had received: as it was explained to me, Nicole was often absent during the second half of the course, and her performance on essay two did not match that of essay one. While Instructor A did not insist on a direct cause-and-effect relationship between these details, the comment did seem to suggest that simply having read the text of choice and possessing the WAID would be a poor substitute for those things plus frequent attendance. This indicates that Instructor A values class time as a medium through which advice is transmitted and awareness gained.

5.8 — Answering the Research Questions

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have presented my findings from each source of data in my study. In this section, assembled in the order of my four research questions, I synthesize my findings and comment on the extent to which they answer my questions.

5.8.1 — Question 1

Beyond the writing prompt itself, what types of information frequently appear in WAIDs across curricula in Carleton’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences?

Twelve types of information⁴² (see section 5.1.2 for details and Appendix B for a comprehensive list) appeared, with varying frequencies, across the eleven WAIDs that comprise my corpus. These categories of information serve to identify the given document as a set of writing-assignment instructions and highlight the divisions of the information within; to characterize the writing assignment, its component parts, and ideal iterations thereof; to state rules concerning submission, format, and acceptable types of sources for research; to describe and explain how the assignment will be evaluated; and to offer advice about how best to work through and write the assignment. Among the twelve categories of information, my corpus shows headings and segmentation markers, rules and regulations, procedural guidelines, and directions to resources to be present in every WAID. This finding suggests that it is very likely that these four types of information will appear in any WAID used in FASS.

I might have extrapolated from these findings that these four types of information are not just likely to appear, but actually *necessary* for a WAID to be perceived as a WAID, if it had not been for the absence of directions to resources from the assignment instructions for Course B's final essay⁴³. Allow me to use the *reductio ad absurdum* tactic once more for a thought experiment regarding the necessity of information categories: With the three other types of information present, could a WAID be perceived as a WAID without directions to resources? Yes. Despite the absence of this common type of information, presumably no one in Course B was befuddled by the purpose of the document they received ahead of their final essay. Then, on the same premise as the previous question, could a WAID be perceived as a WAID without

⁴² This tally includes writing prompts. RQ 1 was formulated on the assumption that all WAIDs must contain writing prompts. As I discuss in section 5.1.2, the corpus shows this not to be the case if my strict definition of writing prompts is applied.

⁴³ The WAIDs from Course A and Course B were not included in my corpus, though both courses belong to FASS.

headings and segmentation markers? The answer is likely yes, though the appearance of the document would be radically different than what students are used to seeing. It would be much less user-friendly for students, and it would require thorough reading in order for its purpose to be discerned. Again—same premise—could a WAID be perceived as a WAID without rules and regulations? I expect so, though students would likely be struck by the absence of some of the most basic but essential information for any assignment: what it is worth, when it is due, and how long it should be. Nevertheless, they would still recognize that specific tasks need to be undertaken. Finally, with the other three categories of information present, could a WAID be perceived as a WAID without procedural guidelines? As I argued in section 5.1.2, not really. By way of comparison, such a WAID would be like a hot dog bun absent a hotdog—someone who sees the empty bun on a plate might be reminded of a familiar summertime favourite, but would not perceive the bun itself as the complete ‘hot dog’ item. Similarly, a WAID absent procedural guidelines would, at a glance, still look like a WAID, but it would establish no exigence for the student. There would be no uptake. Procedural guidelines are the linchpin. Without them, the wheels fall off; there’s no place for the mustard; the paper does not get written.

It bears reiterating that the above findings are drawn from materials used in humanities and social sciences courses exclusively. Furthermore, all such courses were second year level. The resultant data cannot be used to make assumptions about the nature of assignment instruction documents in science courses or in the Economics department. Edward, who struggled with Course B’s final essay, mentioned in his interview that he was used to receiving barely more than a few sentences to introduce his assignments in his computer science major. This is just one person’s testimony, but it is a reminder of the danger in thinking that these findings can be generalized beyond the settings from which they emerged.

Nevertheless, my analysis of the corpus constitutes the most detailed taxonomy of writing-assignment instructions (in the holistic context of the WAID) that is to be found in the extant literature. While it would not be advisable to draw conclusions about WAIDs used outside the realms of the humanities and social sciences (or about writing instructions in high school or at the post-graduate level for that matter), my catalogue of the twelve categories of information could certainly be treated as a baseline for making comparisons between disciplines. It could also serve as a basis upon which to formulate assumptions about writing instructions in other learning contexts—assumptions which could be tested through methods of textual analysis similar to my own. There is much use to which this information could be put. In section 5.9, I outline some of the most beneficial applications for an enriched and detailed understanding of WAIDs.

5.8.2 — Question 2

What features of WAIDs can students be observed to attend to most frequently in their written work?

The word ‘features’ in this question refers to the categories of information that are present in a WAID. Of course, not all of my twelve established categories are meant to be attended to in writing. For instance, students are not expected to respond to headings and segmentation markers. Procedural guidelines, rules and regulations, prompts, and directions to resources all exist to be taken up in a readily identifiable way, though. Likewise, grading rubrics, statements about evaluation, characterizations of good assignments or assignment components, examples of assignment components, statements of assignment purpose, writing/research advice, and expository information about assignment type all intend to shape student writing in a way that is comparatively more tacit, but still noticeable.

My analysis of my student-participants' submitted writing showed that each student attended to every category of information in his or her WAID, as well as every required writing task within those categories⁴⁴. This statement makes it sound as if both WAIDs were a success. This is not untrue, but it is worth bearing in mind that these two documents contained very few categories of information—only five each, and just four which pertained to RQ 2 (as I mentioned above, headings and segmentation markers are impertinent)—and required few distinct tasks to be carried out. Another investigation of students' experiences working with WAIDs that are closer to the corpus norm might produce more diverse results.

Regarding document detail and length, there is something to be said for trimming the fat to get to the choice cuts. But there are two reasons why I must caution against thinking that the above finding means that short, simple WAIDs will be effective, successful WAIDs. First, the assignments from Course A and Course B were straightforward. The nature of what the two instructors wanted from their students might have led them to develop correspondingly straightforward instructions. In other words, their similar approach to their guidelines appeared to suit their assignments, but the same approach might not be as suitable for assignments of other natures. Second, as we have seen, there is more than one way to communicate writing expectations. In-class discussion and dedicated writing workshops can also help prepare students for their assignments. Judging from students' interview comments and my own observations, Course A's writing workshops transmitted information and advice that might otherwise have been written in a WAID. Thus, while Course A and Course B both had similarly short sets of

⁴⁴ I make this distinction because a particular category of information may specify several writing tasks. For example, 'choose one of the following topics' and 'quote from the primary text' are two distinct tasks, but are both procedural guidelines.

written instructions, Course A's students received a much greater deal of information, across mediums, about their upcoming assignment.

It is also worth noting that my sample size was probably too small to support generalizations about ideal lengths or levels of detail for WAIDs. This is particularly true for Course B. Edward and Steve both attended to the required tasks of the assignment but their final grades differed by more than thirty percentage points. This might suggest that the guidelines were easy to follow but that the Instructor B's expectations were elusive. It might suggest that Edward and Steve have different levels of capability, or that Steve worked much harder than Edward. Alternatively, Edward and Steve might each be statistical outliers whose experiences with the assignment and its instructions differed, for a host of potential reasons, from the majority in Course B. Some combination of all three is also possible.

Due to the closely related nature of my second and third⁴⁵ research questions, my findings for RQ 2 impacted my ability to answer RQ 3. In the next section, I examine reasons why my data might have been insufficient to adequately address RQ 2 and particularly RQ 3. I expand on this in section 5.9, where I consider whether my research method was appropriate for my questions, and whether the questions themselves were appropriate in the first place.

5.8.3 — Question 3

What features of WAIDs are most effective in helping students produce the type and quality of writing desired by their instructors?

⁴⁵ Answering RQ 3 first requires that I answer RQ 2. For instance, if no students attended to a particular feature of a WAID in their writing, there would be no point in considering whether that feature was effective (it could be deemed ineffective, but RQ 3 asks which features were effective, and to what extent). Similarly, if all students belonging to a research sample attend to all features of their WAIDs in writing, then all features must be considered in answering RQ 3.

The wording of this question connotes an assumption that certain types of information in WAIDs, independent from rhetorical purpose and assignment subject matter, could affect the quality of students' writing. I did not carry out this research with any suspicions about what those types of information might be. However, I had originally envisioned that a comparison of writing assignments and their corresponding WAIDs from several courses might indeed suggest that particular aspects of WAIDs—as identified, ideally, by student-participants in interviews, or at least seeming to be evident through analysis of submitted papers—had noticeable effects on student performance. In other words, I wondered whether this method of research would point to any such thing⁴⁶. As was the case with RQ 2, the data I collected was insufficient to support this type of conclusion. Instead, my data compels me to conclude that either no features of WAIDs have measurable effects on student writing, or that something about the information I collected was inadequate for a thorough treatment of this research question. I do not have enough evidence to confidently accept or reject this kind of null hypothesis. Rather, I believe that both the similarly simplistic nature of the WAIDs from Course A and Course B and the limited amount of data I was able to collect confounded my ability to answer RQ 3. I further discuss the shortcomings of RQ 2 and RQ 3 in section 5.9.

If pressed for an answer, 'procedural guidelines' was the category of information that was most effective in helping students produce the writing desired by their instructors. However, this is because the majority of the required individual tasks for both assignments are subsumed in this category. In fact, while a long list of topic choices occupied the most space in both WAIDs, procedural guidelines had little else competing with them for real estate. Neither WAID contained characterizations of a good response, grading rubrics, expository information about the

⁴⁶ In section 6.2, I propose a systematic, controlled, larger-scale research design that might produce the data needed to make more confident conclusions about this issue.

assignment type, or any of the other non-essential but otherwise common components of WAIDs⁴⁷. Again, this observation alone is not meant to imply that either WAID was deficient for its original purpose. Their dearth of diverse types of information, though, does mean that when I asked participating students “is there a particular element (or several) of these instructions that has been especially useful in helping you understand or work on this assignment?” there was a markedly limited range of options from which they could choose—much more limited than there would have been in any of the eleven courses whose WAIDs comprise my corpus.

Additionally, while the above observation perhaps makes the forthcoming one moot (at least as it pertains to RQ 2 and RQ 3), having been able to speak with only seven participants meant that there might have been limits to the diversity of student opinions I collected. This is likely to have been particularly true for Course B. As I have mentioned several times in this chapter, I have found it difficult to determine what, if anything, Edward and Steve’s data allows me to say about the course as a whole. Likewise, I am certainly unable to say whether any features of Course B’s WAID were more effective than others in helping students produce the type and quality of writing that Instructor B desired.

5.8.4 — Question 4

In what classroom circumstances are WAIDs most effective in enhancing students’ confidence, understanding of the assignment, and writing performance?

The classroom circumstances of Course A and Course B were noticeably different.

Course A was designated by its department as a ‘Writing Intensive Course.’ Students engaged in

⁴⁷ Course B’s WAID contained one passage that I classified as ‘Writing or Research Advice’: “I encourage you to email your topic ideas by me in advance. If you are having trouble finding a suitable topic, I will do my best to try to help you to develop a project.” This same category of information often appeared in greater depth throughout the corpus.

four writing workshops during its two semesters. Writing goals and writing strategies were clearly familiar topics in classroom discussion. Through our interviews, I observed a remarkable degree of alignment between what Course A's participants felt they were expected to do, and what Instructor A told me they were expected to do. Though it remains unclear how much time was spent discussing writing expectations in Course B, indications from its two participants suggest that it was significantly less than in Course A. Though both participants took up each discrete writing task identified by their WAID, their reported impressions of Instructor B's expectations for their final writing assignment did not align as well with Instructor B's comments as did their counterparts in Course A with Instructor A's comments. The limited number of participants from Course B precludes me from speculating whether their uptake of each required task was fortuitous, or whether the information in the WAID alone was indeed sufficient for most students to achieve this end.

While the imbalance in participant numbers from the two courses makes direct comparisons impossible, the mentioned difference between Course A and Course B's alignment of instructor-expectations and student-understanding seems attributable to the importance placed by Course A on devoting class time to writing discussion. To reiterate something Felix emphasized when I interviewed him, "the instruction sheet should be considered in coordination with the writing workshop." Indeed, it appears that Course A is an example of a classroom circumstance in which WAIDs were contextualized in a way that benefitted students' confidence, task understanding, and writing performance.

5.9 — Critiquing the Research Questions

As I was writing section the previous section, I reassessed my research questions and thought back on what had motivated me to pose them in the first place. A considerable amount of time had passed since I first drafted them, and while I slightly modified their wording after my thesis proposal was approved, the essence of what they ask has not changed. My mind, however, has changed: It has changed regarding the appropriateness of the assumptions that underlie RQ 2 and RQ 3 and the efficacy of my research methods to address them.

RQ 2—what features of WAIDs can students be observed to attend to most frequently in their written work?—assumes that certain features of students’ writing might be traceable to certain features of WAIDs, and that this connection might be discoverable through a close analysis of the both the WAID and the finished writing product. I was inspired to formulate this question by my work as a writing tutor at Carleton University’s Writing Tutorial Service. In my appointments with students, I was witness to many instances in which students who were working with detailed WAIDs had produced writing that seemed to neglect information that to me appeared significant. I did not keep records of these instances at the time, but they led me to wonder whether certain types of information were likelier than others to be attended to in writing, and if so, what factors influenced this phenomenon. I wondered whether the length and design of WAIDs might have anything to do with it—for instance, if a WAID contains several pages of dense text, is useful writing advice on the third page likelier to be missed than if it were placed earlier in the document? Furthermore, is there a threshold that could be detected, a tipping point between the ‘right amount’ of information and ‘too much’ information (or perhaps the requesting of ‘too many’ discrete tasks)? Could it be said with confidence that a WAID could have ‘too little’ information?

As I ruminated on these questions, I began to wonder whether certain types of information are particularly effective in having students produce the writing their instructors are looking for. These are the concerns of RQ 3. For instance, could the inclusion of a grading rubric, with descriptions of the qualities that constitute each letter grade, be seen to make a noticeable difference in how well students handle an assignment? Could directions for locating resources prevent an epidemic of papers based on dubious sources? In wondering such things, I made the assumption that certain aspects of WAIDs—though I made no assumptions about which ones—*must* be more helpful than other types in guiding students toward successful uptake of the tasks required to complete a writing assignment. After all, I worded the question as “*what* features are most effective...”, rather than “*are*⁴⁸ certain features effective...” The latter question should be answered before the former question is raised.

The same is true of RQ 2. The wording of the question makes the assumption that students *do* attend to certain types of information more often than others, and that all that is left to do is discover which ones and why. Despite my data’s inadequacy in answering this question, I do not think this assumption is foolhardy. What needs to be answered first, though, is ‘*can* students be observed to attend to different types of information in WAIDs at varying frequencies?’ The follow up questions would then be ‘what types, under what circumstances, and why?’

RQ 1 and RQ 4 are not free from questionable assumptions either. RQ 1 asks “beyond the writing prompt itself, what types of information frequently appear in WAIDs across curricula in

⁴⁸ Perhaps the most appropriate wording would have been more epistemological in nature: “*can* certain features of WAIDs be observed to be effective in helping students produce the type and quality of writing desired by their professors?” One way of answering this would be by asking students whether a WAID they are using contains anything especially beneficial, then looking at the writing they produce and gathering their instructor’s feedback to see how everything turned out. This is what I attempted to do. A more controlled method is delineated in section 6.2.

Carleton's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences?" As my textual analysis of WAIDs has shown, writing prompts are not kernels, as I had supposed them to be, that puff up into WAIDs when heated. On the contrary, procedural guidelines are the indispensable part of WAIDs, as I have shown. Writing prompts, by comparison (according to the strict definition of prompts I discussed in section 5.1.2), appeared in eight of eleven documents in my corpus. This discovery suggests that RQ 1 would be improved if its first phrase were removed. RQ 4 asks "in what classroom circumstances are WAIDs most effective in enhancing students' confidence, understanding of the assignment, and writing performance?" In the argot of the quantitative researcher, this question makes no null hypothesis. It assumes that there indeed must be ideal circumstances waiting to be discovered. Asking "are there ..." instead of "in what ..." would have been more appropriate. This assumption was not shown by the data to be faulty, but I could have gotten along just as well with neutral wording.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

To conclude, I first look back at the impetus for this research, and observe where my methods and data have led. I consider the implications that my findings have for the field of Writing Studies as well as for those who assign writing and write assignments in the context of university coursework. Next, I outline how modifications to the design and scale of my project could help to deepen our understanding of writing-assignment instructions and identify issues that warrant future research attention. Finally, I reflect on my research process and what I have learned from it as a researcher, and describe the two most pertinent contexts to which my findings could be applied.

6.1 — Summary and Implications

This thesis addressed the lack of research attention that had been devoted to writing-assignment instructions in their fullest form—the WAID. Previously there had been little to no research on either the content of these documents or their use in the context of university classrooms and coursework. This study addressed these research gaps by developing a taxonomy of the information contained within WAIDs, observing and inquiring about how WAIDs are contextualized in undergraduate classroom settings, gathering students' perceptions of the documents provided to them, comparing these perceptions with the assignment goals that their instructors identify in interviews, and examining the writing produced in response to these documents.

As discussed in sections 5.8 and 5.9, my data proved inadequate in providing answers for my second and third research questions. Nevertheless, this study has borne fruit. It has produced detailed insight into the informational content of the genre of WAIDs and the frequency with

which different categories of information appear in WAIDs from the humanities and social sciences. It has produced evidence that students receive more than just writing prompts to initiate and guide their assignments—they receive entire documents, which are frequently highly detailed and may contain up to twelve distinct types of information. These findings underscore the continued need for Writing Studies scholars to look at writing instructions in their fullest incarnation.

This study has also shown how many of the meanings transmitted by the information in WAIDs serve to instantiate power dynamics in the instructor-student relationship. It has shown the varying extents to which students' autonomy as thinkers and writers is encouraged or discouraged by the language in WAIDs, and the varying extents to which the information in WAIDs either micromanages or delegates student activity. It has also shed light on the intertextual connections that entwine WAIDs within the genre system of the university classroom.

Regarding the classroom context, this study has lent support to voices advocating writing discussion in the classroom (Grauerholz, 1999; Hudson, Lane, & Mercer, 2005; Macbeth, 2006, Pillai, 2014). In our interviews, several students from Course A ardently affirmed the usefulness of their writing workshops, and those who did not mention it directly nevertheless made more frequent reference to what had been communicated there than what had been communicated in the WAIDs they received. These findings do not suggest, however, that WAIDs are less important than classroom discussion of writing expectations. On the contrary, it suggests that students' writing experiences are likely to be optimized through clear iterations of both, especially when they are used together and designed to complement one another. Students' understanding is enhanced through WAIDs with full coverage of required writing tasks—at

whatever length is appropriate to that end—alongside exchange with their instructors about how those tasks ought to be carried out.

In sum, this thesis has produced three main findings: (1) writing-assignment instructions appear in information-rich documents that constitute a genre unto themselves. They are part of the genre system of the university course, and they make frequent reference to other texts used in coursework while stimulating and guiding the production of high-stakes original texts: the papers that students write to earn course grades; (2) writing-assignment instructions shape not only the activities (research and writing) that students perform, but also the ways in which those behaviours may be appropriately enacted. Moreover, instructions shape what students see as being possible. The act of preparing and providing instructions is an opportunity for an instructor to encourage or discourage—or foster or constrain—students' capacities and autonomy as thinkers, researchers, and writers. The words instructors write in their WAIDs will influence the words they read in their students' papers. This suggests that both instructors and students could benefit if instructors take time to thoroughly consider the language they use in WAIDs, in order to make sure that it indeed prescribes the amount of control they deem appropriate; and finally, (3) as powerful as WAIDs can be, they may still be seen by students as supplements to what goes on in the classroom. My interview data suggests that students treat in-class discussion of writing assignments and writing expectations as being every bit as important as the information contained in WAIDs, and perhaps even more so. This implies that students might benefit when instructors devote class-time to thorough discussion of their expectations and of the instructions they have provided in their WAIDs. Writing studies scholars could consider further research into determining what constitutes an advantageous balance between written instructional detail and in-class discussion.

6.2 — Future Research Directions

In the following sub-sections, I discuss three aspects of my findings which could be further pursued by future research. These are the uptake and efficacy of information in WAIDs, the representativeness of generalizability of the information categories in my WAIDs corpus, and in-class discussion of writing instructions and expectations.

6.2.1 — Uptake and efficacy of information in WAIDs

As Oliver (1995) pointed out, “determining the influence of prompts on writing quality is extremely complex” (p. 423). So too it is with WAIDs. However, further studies using a variety of research methods could add to the findings reported in this thesis.

In section 5.8.2, I noted that my data did not allow me to formulate any confident answers to RQ 2 or RQ 3. I argued that this owed to the limited number of courses from which I drew participants, the limited number of participants I obtained from the two courses with which I did engage, and the similar number of information categories in those two courses’ WAIDs. However, even if my design had been farther-reaching and had included several WAIDs with significant differences in informational content, one would still be right to contend that comparisons between courses invite a host of potentially confounding variables. These variables conspire, making it difficult to determine whether ostensible effects are indicative of real differences in how WAIDs affect student performance. Foremost among these variables is the difficulty in determining whether there is real variance in the rigor required by assignments in different disciplines. Adding to the confusion, certain courses might be likelier than others to attract students who major in, and thus probably have more experience writing in, their home discipline. Comparisons between WAIDs for assignments that request different rhetorical

strategies (i.e., argumentative versus expository) might also be inadvisable. Furthermore, assignments that require students to perform significantly different numbers of distinct writing or research tasks might be ill-suited for direct comparisons.

A factorial research design⁴⁹ that controls for as many potentially confounding variables as possible would help overcome some of these obstacles. Such a design might look like this: Groups of students, sorted according to year of study, disciplinary specialization, and amount of post-secondary writing experience, are further sorted into two or more broad conditions, determined by the amount of information in the WAIDs they receive. The WAIDs vary according to the categories of information they contain, but prompt the same rhetorical strategy to treat the same subject matter⁵⁰. The participants and their submitted writing are each assigned codes. This allow for a double-blind design in which neither they nor their team of evaluators are aware of the condition to which they belong. The supervising researcher, after having matched the codes, then examines the evaluations to look for differences on a number of quantitative or discursive dimensions (a notable example of the former being the extent to which discrete tasks are recognized and taken up in students' writing). Conclusions, as they apply to the research sample, could then be presented with the confidence that the study has internal validity—it tests what it purports to test.

Of course, even this design might have shortcomings that would make it difficult to generalize from the resultant data. For example, would the participants receive the WAID and produce the paper during a single data-collection session? This would resemble an essay exam setting, which has little resemblance to the classroom setting, where students are generally

⁴⁹ 'Factorial design' denotes an experimental design featuring multiple independent variables.

⁵⁰ Additional levels of complexity could be added to the design by having WAIDs vary not only in informational content, but also in the rhetorical strategies they request and the subject matter they address.

allotted several weeks to research and write their assignments. Then should participants in this hypothetical study be given the ‘classroom amount’ of time to prepare and turn in their writing? And if so, would the experiment require that they conduct research? For this to be practicable, the researcher would presumably need to offer an enticing incentive. It is hard to imagine what this might be, especially if the research were conducted during the regular university semester, when students are busy with a multitude of tasks. Additionally, it would be debatable whether the offered incentive approximates the incentives that students have for writing in their courses. Furthermore, participants would be bereft of the course context which normally situates their writing. Context is crucial—for instance, the conditions under which students write a course’s second paper are not the same as the conditions under which they write the first.

In a pragmatic sense, then, are RQ 2 and RQ3 unanswerable? No—especially not when reframed in the way that I propose in section 5.9⁵¹—but I do not think they can be sufficiently addressed through any single study. This includes the hypothetical (and impracticable) one described above. Instead, I think we can slowly accrue an understanding of how variations in WAIDs affect students’ writing performances through the accumulation of findings from a number of different research designs. For instance, if the hypothetical double-blind factorial design were to be conducted so as to approximate essay exam conditions, its findings could be considered alongside those from smaller, qualitative studies in order to triangulate toward a theory of effective WAID design. If my methods were to be repeated several times in a variety of disciplinary settings, each subsequent investigation would add colour to the canvas. Over time, an identifiable picture would begin to emerge.

⁵¹ Research questions 2 and 3 might be better presented as ‘can students be observed to attend to different types of information in WAIDs at varying frequencies?’ with the follow-up ‘what types, under what circumstances, and why?’

6.2.2 — Information categories in WAIDs

More corpora of WAIDs could be compiled by future researchers. There must certainly be a lot to learn about how WAIDs look and function in disciplines as different as Engineering and Public Relations and Policy Management. While my corpus for this study was assembled from course materials used in a diverse and populous university faculty, its narrow scope (focusing only on second-year humanities and social sciences classes) becomes evident when one takes a bird's eye view of the programs offered by institutions of Carleton University's size. The corpus is also small—WAIDs from eleven courses are enough to establish the types of information that the genre uses, but too few to confidently predict how frequently each information type might appear in WAIDs outside the corpus. Some questions that could be pursued include: Do other WAIDs contain categories of information that were not found in my corpus? Do different disciplines tend to favour particular categories of information in their WAIDs? Are there unique WAID configurations favoured by different disciplines? Are there differences between disciplines in the tenor of language used in WAIDs? Do disciplines differ in the amount of autonomy that their WAIDs offer students in the research and writing process?

6.2.3 — Classroom discussion about writing instructions

My findings indicate that students highly value class time devoted to discussing their writing assignments' instructions. It gives students a chance to work through the instructions as a group where diverse opinions and inquiries can be voiced. It also gives students a chance to hear their instructors' expectations in their own words. That I discovered this is perhaps unsurprising to most readers. It passes the eyeball test—it seems like common sense. Still, this attitude was expressed by just five student-participants from a single course. It does not guarantee that a

majority of university students feel the same way. Even if it did, it is worth considering whether it matters that students simply ‘feel’ that classroom writing discussion is beneficial. People embrace all sorts of methods and treatments that have been shown by rigorous investigation to be ineffectual. Larger-scale studies, in which mean assignment grades in classes that have devoted writing discussion are compared with mean grades in classes that do not, would go some way toward clearing this up.

If it *were* confirmed that average assignment scores skew upward, to a level of confidence beyond chance, in classes with dedicated writing discussion sessions, the research question that would then demand the most attention would be: can a particular method of classroom writing discussion be observed to account for a significant portion of the variance in this comparison? After all, there are many ways that students and instructors could engage with instructional material and assignment expectations. For example, might a student-centred method of group-brainstorming and rough-draft exchange show itself to be most beneficial, or might a student-to-instructor question and answer session be more, equally, or less worthwhile? There would be much to be discovered if it were shown across studies that in-class discussion of the instructions for writing assignments has tangible benefits for students.

6.3 — Reflection

During the extended period of time that elapsed between developing my research design and writing my findings and discussion chapter, I continually discovered published research addressing concerns similar to those that motivated this project. As my understanding of the varied approaches of these articles and studies gradually coalesced, I began to see my research design as an omnivorous ‘kitchen-sink’ approach in comparison with the more tightly focused

approaches of others. After much reflection, I believe that my design has been both advantageous and disadvantageous for understanding what WAIDs are and how they function in the university classroom and coursework context.

While readers of my research will doubtless recognize the complementarity of RQ 1 (concerning the shape and content of WAIDs) and RQ 2, RQ 3, and RQ 4 (concerning students' experiences working with WAIDs and the ways that WAIDs influence their writing), some might argue that the two concerns ought to have been pursued as separate projects. After all, breadth often comes at the expense of depth, and my decision to simultaneously address both issues likewise required me to divide both my cognitive and temporal resources. Yet while my research design did require my attention to be divided and thus perhaps sacrificed depth in one area or another, I would argue that this was necessary: I would not have been able to even attempt answering RQ 2 and RQ 3 if I had not first been able to thoroughly analyze a sizeable selection of WAIDs. Even though I was unable to find much in my data in response to those questions, my answers to RQ 1 gave me the tools I needed to see that Course A's and Course B's WAIDs were atypical. These tools helped me understand why my data might have been inadequate to address RQ 2 and RQ 3. They then helped me envision how adjustments to my research design might allow for a more thorough investigation in the future.

In conducting Master's thesis research, deep and thorough focus on a specific issue is a venerable goal. Equally venerable, though, is the discovery that results from immersing one's self in the murky waters that wash between the shores of theory and practice. While I do not mean to suggest that this nomenclature applies directly to the gulf between RQ1 and RQ 2, RQ 3, and RQ 4, I do think that the metaphor is a useful way of understanding my intentions in simultaneously pursuing all four questions. I wanted my growing awareness of the form and

content of WAIDs to contribute to my analysis of my participants' interview data and submitted writing. I also wanted my growing awareness of students' perceptions of how WAIDs are contextualized within courses to contribute to my understanding of the space that WAIDs occupy within the university classroom. To these ends, my research design has been advantageous. Its limitations are clear, but they have given rise to many worthy future research directions—the development of which is another venerable goal of the research enterprise.

My findings have much to offer instructors as they develop assignments and corresponding WAIDs, and as they make decisions about how to present their expectations and instructions to students. A developed awareness of what WAIDs do as a genre, the types of information that students might be used to seeing in their documents in other courses, and the ways that students experience (and wish to experience) writing instructions is sure to benefit instructors and their students. If I were in a position to consult with instructors during their developing of writing instructions for a new assignment, I would point out the categories of information they have included and, if necessary, draw their attention to others that students that my findings suggest students are used to seeing (or ones that other researchers think should be seen more frequently). I would note whether their instructions and language choices impose any significant constraints on students' thinking and research. If so, I would ask the instructor to reflect on the purpose of these impositions, not to encourage their removal but simply to make sure that the instructor has considered their potential impact and has written them deliberately⁵². Finally, I would ask how the instructor plans to present the instructions to students, and I would

⁵² It is likely that instructors draw on latent genre knowledge of WAIDs when they create their own. The prominence of constraining language in WAIDs means that some instructors might adopt this style without having considered whether this is the most appropriate way to introduce students to the tasks they are being assigned. In some cases, it might be; in other cases, it might not. Awareness of this tendency, then, is key to making informed style choices when developing WAIDs.

recommend devoting structured class time to discussing them.

While the classroom applications of this research are many, the original impetus for this project came from my work as a tutor at a writing center, and I think that that setting is also fertile ground for the dissemination and application of this work. A tutor who is familiar with the types of information frequently (or infrequently) contained in WAIDs can help struggling students identify what information is present and what information is missing, and help guide their recognition of where to look for what's missing (or whether they have encountered this information in another context). A tutor who understands WAIDs as a rhetorical genre can help students grasp the responses WAIDs intend to engender, and guide their understanding of why information is presented in certain ways. I remember the way that my comfort level with research articles increased when the rhetorical moves that occur in specific places were explicated for me; I assume that students could benefit from a similar road-mapping of WAIDs. Further, a tutor who understands the value that students place on in-class discussion of instructions and expectations can encourage students to recall how written instructions were contextualized in previous class sessions, or alert students to discussions that might be forthcoming (along with pertinent questions that could be asked).

In sum, this research has shown what WAIDs are and how they function as a genre within the university classroom context. Importantly, we have seen that students tend to think of WAIDs as tools that are supplementary to classroom discussion when such discussion is engaged in regularly. These findings will be of interest and value to students, instructors, and writing centres alike. They would have a natural home in the genre-based writing pedagogy advocated by Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi (2004). Students who learned about how the demands of the course context shape the types of information and language used in WAIDs would surely be

empowered as student-writers. Future research could consider the questions I was unable to answer—do students attend to certain features of WAIDs more frequently than others, and if so, why?—by looking at a more diverse selection of WAIDs at use in real writing scenarios. It should also further explore how writing instructions and expectations are discussed in the classroom context: how do instructors express their expectations, what aspects of their assignments do they devote the most attention to, and how might students most benefit in this setting?

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Appendix A: Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi's Genre Analysis Heuristic

1. Collect Samples of the Genre

If you are studying a genre that is fairly public, such as the wedding announcement, you can look at samples from various newspapers. You can also locate samples of a genre in textbooks and manuals about the genre [...]. If you are studying a less public genre, such as the Patient Medical History Form, you might have to visit different doctors' offices to collect samples. Try to gather samples from more than one place (for example, wedding announcements from different newspapers, medical history forms from different doctors' offices) so that you get a more accurate picture of the complexity of the genre. The more samples of the genre you collect, the more you will be able to notice patterns within the genre.

2. Identify the Scene and Describe the Situation in which the Genre is Used

Try to identify the larger scene in which the genre is used. Seek answers to questions about the genre's situation such as the ones below: Setting: Where does the genre appear? How and when is it transmitted and used? With what other genres does this genre interact?

Subject: What topics, issues, ideas, questions, etc. does the genre address? When people use this genre, what is it that they are they interacting about?

Participants: Who uses the genre? Writers: Who writes the texts in this genre? Are multiple writers possible? What roles do they perform? What characteristics must writers of this genre possess? Under what circumstances do writers write the genre (e.g., in teams, on a computer, in a rush)?

Readers: Who reads the texts in this genre? Is there more than one type of reader for this genre? What roles do they perform? What characteristics must readers of this genre possess?

Under what circumstances do readers read the genre (e.g., at their leisure, on the run, in waiting rooms)?

Purposes: Why do writers write this genre and why do readers read it? What purposes does the genre fulfill for the people who use it?

3. Identify and Describe Patterns in the Genre's Features

What recurrent features do the samples share? For example: What content is typically included? What excluded? How is the content treated? What sorts of examples are used? What counts as evidence (personal testimony, facts, etc.)? What rhetorical appeals are used? What appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos appear? How are texts in the genres structured? What are their parts, and how are they organized? In what format are texts of this genre presented? What layout or appearance is common? How long is a typical text in this genre? What types of sentences do texts in the genre typically use? How long are they? Are they simple or complex, passive or active? Are the sentences varied? Do they share a certain style? What diction (types of words) is most common? Is a type of jargon used? Is slang used? How would you describe the writer's voice?

4. Analyze What These Patterns Reveal about the Situation and Scene

What do these rhetorical patterns reveal about the genre, its situation, and the scene in which it is used? Why are these patterns significant? What can you learn about the actions being performed through the genre by observing its language patterns? What arguments can you make about these patterns? As you consider these questions, focus on the following: What do participants have to know or believe to understand or appreciate the genre? Who is invited into

the genre, and who is excluded? What roles for writers and readers does it encourage or discourage? What values, beliefs, goals, and assumptions are revealed through the genre's patterns? How is the subject of the genre treated? What content is considered most important? What content (topics or details) is ignored? What actions does the genre help make possible? What actions does the genre make difficult? What attitude toward readers is implied in the genre? What attitude toward the world is implied in it?

From pages 93-94 in Devitt, A. J., Reiff, M. J., & Bawarshi, A. S. (2004). *Scenes of writing: Strategies for composing with genres*. New York, NY: Longman.

Appendix B: Categories of Information in WAIDs

(Categories organized by frequency of occurrence across WAIDs in the corpus)

- a. **Headings and segmentation markers**
- b. **Rules and Regulations**
- c. **Procedural guidelines**
- d. **Directions to resources**
- e. **Characterization of a good response or assignment component**
- f. **Prompts**
- g. **Writing or research advice**
- h. **Statement of purpose for assignment**
- i. **Expository information about assignment type**
- j. **Statements about evaluation**
- k. **List of assignment components**
- l. **Grading rubric**

Appendix C: Student Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

1. Is there a particular name you would like me to use to refer to you in my research report?
2. How old are you?
3. At this moment, what year of study do you consider yourself to be in?
4. Have you declared a major? If so, what is it? If not, what do you think you will major in?
5. What do you consider to be your primary language?
6. Do you speak any other languages?
7. Approximately how many papers do you think you have written since you started university?
8. What percentage of (your course's) class sessions do you think you attended this semester?
9. How often do you think you arrived late for class this semester?

Assignment Questions

1. Did you visit your instructor to discuss the essay, or exchange emails about it or anything like that?
2. At what stage are you in the writing process for this assignment?
3. What do you think are your instructor's intentions for this writing assignment?
4. Is there a particular element (or several) of these instructions that you feel was emphasized above others when the instructor introduced the assignment?
5. Are there any aspects of the instructions that you find confusing?
6. Are there any aspects of the instructions that you wish had been given more attention in class?
7. Is there a particular element (or several) of these instructions that have been especially useful in helping you understand and/or work on this assignment?

8. Is there anything about the instructions you have received for this essay that seems different from the instructions that you have received for other writing assignments? If so, could you describe the difference? Do you find this difference to be beneficial to you, or detrimental?

Please explain.

(Alternatively, is there anything that you are being asked to do or that you feel is expected of you with this essay that seems different from other assignments?)

9. Is there anything you wish had been included in the writing instructions?

Appendix D: Instructor Interview Questions

1. What do you hope students will learn or come to understand by completing this assignment?
2. From an assessment standpoint, what features would characterize an excellent response to this assignment?

Appendix E: Research Ethics Board Approval Form



Carleton University Research Office
Research Ethics Board
1325 Dunton Tower
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6 Canada
Tel: 613-520-2517
ethics@carleton.ca

Ethics Clearance Form

This is to certify that the Carleton University Research Ethics Board has examined the application for ethical clearance. The REB found the research project to meet appropriate ethical standards as outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2nd edition* and, the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research*.

New clearance

Renewal of original clearance

Original date of clearance:

Date of clearance	5 July 2013
Researcher	Craig St. Jean, Master's student
Department	School of Linguistics and Language Studies
Supervisor	Prof. Graham Smart, School of Linguistics and Language Studies
Project number	14-0147
Title of project	Contextualization and effectiveness of writing assignment instruction documents

Clearance expires: **31 May 2014**

All researchers are governed by the following conditions:

Annual Status Report: You are required to submit an Annual Status Report to either renew clearance or close the file. Failure to submit the Annual Status Report will result in the immediate suspension of the project. Funded projects will have accounts suspended until the report is submitted and approved.

Changes to the project: Any changes to the project must be submitted to the Carleton University Research Ethics Board for approval. All changes must be approved prior to the continuance of the research.

Adverse events: Should any participant suffer adversely from their participation in the project you are required to report the matter to the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. You must submit a written record of the event and indicate what steps you have taken to resolve the situation.

Suspension or termination of clearance: Failure to conduct the research in accordance with the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2nd edition* and the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research* may result in the suspension or termination of the research project.



Andy Adler, Chair
Carleton University Research Ethics Board



Louise Heslop, Vice-Chair
Carleton University Research Ethics Board

Appendix F: Student Participant Informed Consent Form



Canada's Capital University

The Content, Contextualization and Effectiveness of Writing-Assignment Instruction Documents – Participant Informed Consent Form

Date of ethics clearance: 5 July 2013

Date that clearance expires: 31 May 2014

Dear student:

You have indicated an interest in participating in my research about the effects of writing-assignment instructions on students' writing experiences. Your participation in this study will involve both an interview conducted outside of scheduled class hours and your permission to allow me to view the writing you submit for one of your required course assignments after your instructor has submitted final marks. With your permission, I will audio-record our interview session.

It is possible that you might feel uncomfortable discussing certain aspects of your writing process or your understanding and interpretations of the writing assignment you are working on, and its corresponding instructions. I will do everything I can to minimize any discomfort you might feel. You will be free to pass on any questions you would prefer not to answer or to end our interview session at any point. Your instructor will not be aware that you have participated in this study until after he or she has submitted the semester's final marks. While this ensures that your participation in the research project will have no effect on your grade for the course, it is possible that your instructor's knowledge of your participation could affect your relationship if you were to take another course with him or her in the future.

If you decide that you no longer wish to participate in the study, you may withdraw at any time before September 1st, 2013. If you do withdraw from the project, all the data that I have received from you will be destroyed, if you request it. All information that you provide during interviews, as well as any information pertaining to your submitted written work, will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be stored securely in a locked cabinet in my home. All electronic data will be kept on a password-protected USB drive in the cabinet. The data will only be accessible to me and my supervisor, Dr. Graham Smart. All data collected in this study will be retained for three years after its conclusion (December, 2013) for related research projects. If this data is used in the future, your confidentiality will be maintained.

This research study has been reviewed and received clearance from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study,

you are welcome to address them to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board, Dr. Andy Adler at 613-520-2517 or ethics@carleton.ca.

If you have any further questions about this study and your participation, please feel free to contact me by email at craig_stjean@carleton.ca. You may also reach my supervisor, Dr. Graham Smart, through the School of Linguistics and Language Studies by phone at (613) 520-2600 extension 2000, or by email at graham_smart@carleton.ca.

I have read the information above, have been given an opportunity to discuss it with the researcher, and any questions I had have been answered satisfactorily. I hereby consent to participate in the study and to have my interview session audio-recorded.

Signature of participant:

Date:

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix G: Instructor Participant Informed Consent Form



The Content, Contextualization, and Effectiveness of Writing-Assignment Instruction Documents – Participant Informed Consent Form

Date of ethics clearance: July 5th, 2013

Expiry date of clearance: May 31st, 2014

Dear participant:

You have indicated an interest in contributing information to my research about the role of writing-assignment instructions in students' writing experiences. Your participation in this study will involve providing me with a writing-assignment instruction document (often referred to as an 'instruction sheet' or 'assignment instructions') that you are using in a class you are currently teaching.

It is possible that you might feel uncomfortable about having one of your teaching materials used as data for a research report. Please be assured that your instruction document will not be included in my report, nor will you and your course be referred to by name. My purpose with your document is simply to contribute to a better understanding of the contents that tend to appear in writing instruction documents across Carleton's FASS undergraduate curriculum.

Your participation and materials will be kept strictly confidential. The data will only be accessible to me and my supervisor, Dr. Graham Smart. All data collected in this study will be retained for three years after its conclusion (December, 2013) for related research projects. If this data is used in the future, your confidentiality will be maintained. If you decide that you no longer wish to have your document used as data in this research project, you may indicate this to me at any time before December 1st, 2013, and I will withdraw it. If you do request to have your document withdrawn from the project, I will destroy all digital and physical versions of the document in my possession, should you request it.

This research study has been reviewed and received clearance from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you are welcome to address them to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board, Dr. Andy Adler at 613-520-2517 or ethics@carleton.ca. You are encouraged to contact me (craig_stjean@carleton.ca) or my supervisor Dr. Graham Smart (graham_smart@carleton.ca) with any questions you may have about this research. Dr. Smart may also be reached through the School of Linguistics and Language Studies by phone at (613) 520-2600, ext. 2000.

I have read the information above, have been given an opportunity to discuss it with the researcher, and any questions I had have been answered satisfactorily. I hereby consent to the use of my writing-assignment instruction document in this research.

Signature of participant:

Date:

Signature of researcher:

Date: