This paper aims to explain the classification developed for all 2858 texts in the BAWE corpus as members of thirteen genre families identified for assessed university student writing. An understanding of this genre classification provides a broad overview of types of university writing, and assists teachers and researchers to use the BAWE corpus effectively. It enables investigations of disciplinary writing in terms of and across genres, as well as register comparisons across disciplines or across levels of study within genre families.

Prior university-wide taxonomies of student writing have been developed on intuition, the opinions of faculty, or data from course documentation and task prompts. In contrast, our classification is grounded in analysis of all BAWE (British Academic Written English) corpus texts actually produced by university students in England for assessment purposes. This builds on the American tradition of classifying university student writing tasks (e.g. Horowitz 1986; Hale et al. 2004; Melzer 2009) and the very different Australian tradition of classifying primary and secondary school children’s written texts as genres (e.g. Martin and Rothery 1986; Coffin 2006).

Our research design encompasses 1) an exploration of the disciplinary context through, e.g., interviews with tutors and students, collection of assignment documentation; 2) the development of a corpus of British Academic Written English (BAWE), which contains 2761 good quality assignments stratified across more than 30 disciplines and 4 levels of study; 3) a classification and descriptions of genres and genre families of assessed writing from a broadly systemic functional linguistic perspective; and 4) a multidimensional analysis of lexical and grammatical features (Biber, e.g. 1988).

Our approach to genre classification builds on Martin’s concept of genre as a staged, goal oriented social process through which we live our lives in a given culture (e.g. 1997:13). We identify five broad overlapping social purposes for assessed university student writing. We identify 13 genre families, each with their own exclusive, specific purpose, generic staging, and genre networks (e.g. are they similar to professional genres such as company reports or literary genres such as anthologies). Within each of the genre families we have identified around 6 distinct genres, and more are possible. Biber’s dimensions indicate how lexico-grammatical patterns vary across genre families (as well as discipline, disciplinary group and study level).

The classification aims to be substantial, evidenced, tagged, organised, and manageable to enable comparisons of genres within families, as well as comparisons of language variation across disciplines and levels of study. Future research might also test the classification against student writing from other contexts.

Notes
1. The ‘investigation of genres of assessed writing in British Higher Education’ project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-23-0800) from 2004 to 2007. As part of this, the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus was developed at the Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Sheena Gardner (formerly of the Centre for Applied Linguistics [previously called CELTE], Warwick), Paul Thompson (formerly of the Department of Applied Linguistics, Reading) and Paul Wickens (Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes). We are grateful to the students who contributed their work, without which the corpus would not exist. 2. Information about the corpus and related publications is at www.coventry.ac.uk/BAWE 3. The BAWE corpus is freely available to search at http://the.sketchengine.co.uk/open/. Registration with SketchEngine provides greater capabilities (e.g. key word searches). 4. The BAWE corpus can be requested for research purposes from the Oxford Text Archive: http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/headers/2539.xml.
Genre family classification

Up to date, detailed disciplinary knowledge and understanding

1. Explanation: A descriptive account, written to demonstrate understanding of the object of study and the ability to describe and explain systematically how it functions.

2. Exercise: Data analysis or a series of responses to ‘short’ questions, written to provide practice in key skills and to consolidate knowledge of key concepts.

   Independent reasoning, critical evaluation and argumentation

3. Critique: A text including a descriptive account and evaluation, often involving tests, written to demonstrate understanding of the object of study and to demonstrate the ability to evaluate and/or assess the significance of the object of study.

4. Essay: A discussion, exposition, factorial, challenge, or commentary, written to develop the ability to construct a coherent argument and develop critical thinking skills.

   Research methods leading to conduct of independent research

5. Literature Survey: A summary including varying degrees of critical evaluation, written to demonstrate familiarity with literature relevant to the focus of study.

6. Methodology Recount: A description of procedures undertaken by the writer, possibly including Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections, written to develop familiarity with disciplinary procedures and methods, and additionally to record experimental findings.

7. Research Report: A text typically including literature review, account of an original study, and discussion of outcomes, written to demonstrate the ability to design and undertake a complete piece of research, and to appreciate its significance in the field.

   Preparation for professional practice

8. Case Study: A description of an exemplar or particular case with recommendations or suggestions for future action, typically written to gain an understanding of professional practice (e.g. in business, medicine, or engineering).

9. Design Specification: A text typically including an expression of purpose, an account of component selection, and a design proposal for manufacture or implementation; with optional account of the development and testing of the design.

10. Problem question: A text presenting relevant arguments or possible solution(s) to a problem, written to practise the application of specific methods in response to simulated professional scenarios (e.g. in law).

11. Proposal: A text including an expression of purpose, a detailed plan, and persuasive argumentation, written to demonstrate the ability to make a case for future action.

   Writing for oneself and others

12. Empathy writing: A personal letter, news report or similar non-academic genre, written to demonstrate understanding and appreciation of the relevance of academic ideas by translating them into a non-academic register, for a non-specialist readership.

13. Narrative Recount: A fictional or factual recount of events, written to develop awareness of motives and/or the behaviour of organisations or individuals (including oneself).
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