University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center
Learning from a Mentor Text
Adapted and Expanded from Lisa Emerson, Massey University

The best way to learn how to write in a genre that is important in your graduate program and new to you—a thesis proposal, a dissertation, a grant application, a policy paper etc.—is to identify one or more mentor texts: examples *from your discipline* that can serve as your guide.

Once you have identified a mentor text, consider creating a *rhetorical* outline of the text or sections of the text. To create a *rhetorical* outline, read paragraph by paragraph and jot down on a sheet of paper the gist of what that paragraph *does*.

For instance, a reverse outline of the introduction to a research article about the potential benefits of MRI imaging for Physical Therapy patients with Parkinson's might look like this:

- Par 1: *Introduces the disease and the question of whether a therapy useful in other diseases could be successful here*
- Par 2: *Further explains the therapy and summarizes how it has worked with other conditions*
- Par 3: *Notes limitations in other conditions and how limits have been addressed*
- Par 4-6: *More specific review of research of MRI imaging to date in healthy populations and patients with neurological disorders*
- Par 7: *Spotlights the gap—lack of work to date on MRI imaging in Parkinson's clinical settings—and introduces the researchers' focus/question*.

After you've outlined the text or a portion of it, you can study the resulting "skeleton" to consider how the text you want to compose might be ordered. You can also draw on the questions below to draw lessons about the logic behind the mentor's text sequence and about disciplinary style.

Sequencing
- What is the main idea (puzzle, gap, claim, problem, question) of this text? Where does it first appear?

- How many sections does the text have?

- How are the sections ordered and what is the logic behind that order?

- What work does each section do in articulating, demonstrating, advancing, or complicating the text's main idea?

Relationships
- Where is the author positioned? Where and how do you sense the writer's presence? (Consider not only direct uses of "I" or "We" but places where emphasis and urgency, praise or criticism, softeners and hedges, wit and humor etc. signal a writer's presence, attitude, and personality.)

- How does the writing engage readers? (Consider signposts, forecasting, and other guides that help a reader navigate the text. Consider words and phrases that seem designed to invite or urge reader judgment, emotional investment, trust or wariness etc.)

- What is each section's target readership? What level of knowledge is assumed? (In a research article on a possible therapeutic approach for patients with Parkinson's, for instance, the Introduction and Discussion may have among its target readership busy practitioners while the Methods and Results section aim to be informative and convincing for a more specialist audience of researchers.)

- How are other authors used (to support a claim, introduce a debate, provide a platform or point of departure …?)

- How many references are used? Where is the writer in relation to those references (e.g., to what extent does the writer visibly respond to, evaluate, build on, counter or otherwise interact with other referenced authors or to what extent does the writer report on or cite other scholarship without visible interaction)?

Style
- Look at two paragraphs or sections. What is the main idea in each?

- How long are the sentences? How complex?

- How do the sentences express ideas? (Where is the subject? What kinds of verbs are used? Is the voice passive or active?)

- Circle the verbs. Are they past-tense or present-tense?

- How does the writer develop tension or a sense of progression or story in this section or in these paragraphs?

- What rhetorical or poetic devices (alliteration, allusion, analogy, double entrendre etc.) does the writer use?

- Are there figures and graphs? How do they relate to the text?

Overall, you can use your mentor text and rhetorical outline to

- storyboard and rough out your own first draft

- guide you any time you face a question such as whether a paragraph belongs in "Results" or "Discussion" or how to boost or soften a claim

- create a rhetorical outline of your own completed or in-progress draft to see how it works or could work better to tell *your* research story!