Abstract: As state and national curriculum standards continue to change, it is important for teachers to develop a common set of definitions for terms that appear in those standards. This column describes the four modes of discourse—narrative, descriptive, exposition, and persuasion—and links them to a variety of genres students can write in to compose authentic texts. In addition, the connection to author’s purpose is discussed. Sharing a common set of definitions lessens the confusion teachers face when implementing the standards.

Keywords: TEKS, modes, author’s purpose, genre

Regina Chanel Rodriguez is an assistant professor in Curriculum & Instruction and the Director of the new Route 66 Writing Project at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas. She teaches undergraduate courses in ELA and social studies methods and graduate courses in educational research. She is currently working with Shona Rose and Betty Coneway on the TEA Writing Pilot Program to create training materials for classroom teachers. She can be reached at rcrdrguez@wtamu.edu.

Shona Rose serves as the Learning Leader for English Language Arts and Reading for Region 16 and the President of the Coalition of Reading and English Supervisors of Texas. She is currently working on her doctoral degree in Literacy, Diversity, and Language at Texas Tech University as well as coordinating the Panhandle’s participation in the TEA Writing Pilot Program. She can be reached Shona.Rose@esc16.net.

Betty Coneway is an assistant professor of Education at West Texas A&M University. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in the areas of early childhood and reading education. She is serving as a representative of higher education and providing assistance in coordinating the TEA Writing Pilot Program. She can be reached at BConeway@wtamu.edu.

The modes of discourse have a complicated history dating as far back as the 1820s. Use of the modes peaked in the 1950s in freshman composition courses and, based on textbook subject matter for those courses, has decreased ever since (Connors, 1981). Even though modes are an antiquated form of rhetoric theory, they are still prevalent in the TEKS (see Table 1) and the Common Core State Standards, as well as the current STAAR requirements. Because of their presence in current standards and assessments across the country, it is important for K-12 educators to understand what the different modes of discourse are and what emphasis should be placed on the difference between the modes. This column discusses the four modes as created by Alexander Bain in 1866 (Harned, 1985) (see Table 2), why the modes can be confusing to teach, and how they connect to author’s purpose.

Mode Confusion and Author’s Purpose

Teachers search for texts that match their standards and texts on assessments. In their search, they struggle to find texts exhibiting all the features of one mode and none from the others. In current publications, authors frequently use multiple modes within one text, utilizing the structures that most effectively convey their purpose. Two examples of texts using multiple modes include Knut: How One Polar Bear Captivated the World (Hatkoff, Hatkoff, Hatkoff, 2016) and The Art of the Personal Essay (Henley, 2015).

Figure 1. 2016 example of eighth grade STAAR reading passage. This figure illustrates how an assessment text can utilize more than one mode to achieve the author’s purpose.
Specific focus on text structures sometimes further muddies the waters. Teachers search for texts that follow specific patterns—sequential, cause and effect, problem and solution—yet find most expository texts use several of these techniques in tandem (Culham, 2016) with narrative anecdotes and description phrases or sentences.

Note this example in Figure 1. Clearly, the dominant mode is expository, but the author marshals several techniques to reach the purpose to “explain how scientists have tried to understand déjà vu but have yet to come to a definite conclusion” (TEA, 2016). The author has chosen to structure the third paragraph in an expository mode using a classic cause and effect approach. Paragraph four uses descriptive techniques to explain structures in the brain that might have caused the familiarity of déjà vu, while the fifth paragraph uses a sequential narrative approach to tell the story of how the researchers conducted their experiment.

Britton’s question about using modes as an effective technique for teaching students to write seems to fit with literary analysis as well: Modes appear to not only be misunderstood, but also outdated frames for thinking about text (Britton, 1975). Modes don’t live in the wild as pure forms, but as multidimensional discourses evolved from author’s purpose. Kinneavy (1973) explained, “No theory of modes of discourse ever pretends that the modes do not overlap. In actuality, it is impossible to have pure narration, etc. However in a given discourse there will often be . . . [a] ‘dominant’ mode.” Yet, assessment paradigms and standards send teachers on a safari for a textual Dodo bird, an extinct form of discourse.

Modes can take on different slants depending on the author’s purpose. These modes may appear as a rigid classification system, but in practice they should be fluid and can weave in and out of one another, borrowing elements as needed to achieve the author’s purpose. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) advises the profession that “digital environments have added new modalities while constantly creating new publics, audiences, purposes, and invitations to compose” (NCTE, 2016, para 7). New forms of writing will continue to morph and evolve through new
literacies, blending the modes as needed. Teachers must be ready to respond with pedagogy and knowledge of variegated modes of writing that fit the diverse needs and purposes of students who will be writing for today and tomorrow.

Finding a Solution: Focus on Author’s Purpose

The discrepancy between authentic texts and rigidly defined modes of discourse present a challenge in writing pedagogy where teachers are expected to prepare a diverse set of writers how to write for diverse audiences and purposes. Instead of gearing the focus on the clear-cut lines of the modes, we encourage teachers to utilize a balanced literacy approach. By connecting reading strategies, such as Notice and Note (Beers & Probst, 2013), where students are taught to think critically about a text and the choices the author makes to achieve his or her purpose, with effective writing strategies, it becomes possible to address the needs of all students.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name of Mode</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples of Genres</th>
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| Narrative    | The purpose of the narrative mode is to tell a story which contains a clear, identifiable storyline and reflects the basic story elements of characterization, plot, setting, and theme. This writing mode uses sensory details to surprise, challenge, or entertain the reader as they “experience” the event (Culham, 2016). | • personal narrative  
• memoir  
• novels  
• short story  
• flash fiction  
• autobiography  
• biography  
• dramatic texts  
• narrative poetry |
| Descriptive  | The objective of this mode of writing is to vividly describe something—object, person, place, experience, emotion, situation, etc. The goal is to paint a clear image that evokes a sense of recognition and connection within the reader (Purdue OWL, 2013). | • journal writing  
• nature journals  
• character sketches  
• scientific experiment observations  
• found poems  
• lines or passages in the other modes of writing |
| Exposition (Expository) | The expository mode is used to convey information or to explain an event, image, person, or thing. Effective expository writing should contain a main idea, supporting details and a conclusion. Expository texts should be used “to give directions, sequence steps, compare one thing to another, explain causes and effect, or describe problems and solutions” (Tompkins, 2017, p. 50). | **Informational**  
• textbooks  
• news stories (not including opinion or editorial pieces)  
• scientific writing-lab report  
• FAQs  
• MLA- and APA-style research papers  
• resumes  
• reports  
• memos  

**Procedural**  
• recipes  
• furniture assembly directions  
• instruction manuals  
• how-to books, magazine articles, or newspaper columns  

**Analytical**  
• analytical essays may fall under this mode if they primarily use logic and reason to evaluate and explain a topic to the reader |
| Persuasion (Persuasive) | The persuasive mode of writing asks students to investigate a topic by collecting, generating, and evaluating evidence. Afterwards, the writer must establish a position on the topic and then share personal reasons for their opinion in a concise manner. Facts, details, or examples should be used to convince someone to believe as you do. The writer should craft their essay for a particular audience and use persuasive strategies in their argument (Lane & Bernabei, 2001; Petit & Soto, 2002). | • editorial column  
• advertisements  
• book reviews  
• movie reviews  
• letter of recommendation  
• letter of complaint  
• cover letters  
• an analytical essay may be persuasive if the writer uses diction and rhetorical devices to convince the reader of the writer's point of view. |

Table 2. Descriptions and definitions of the four modes of discourse
such as writing compositions that replicate texts used outside of the classroom (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2007), teachers can train students to critically analyze texts as writers (Bunn, 2011). Students can then use this analysis to generate authentic texts, utilizing examples of author’s craft to achieve their intended purpose. Shifting the focus from stringent mode categories to how author’s use elements of craft to achieve their purpose will more effectively prepare students for writing in their careers.

References


