

Discourse Communities

All of you are, in one way or another, looking at discourse communities. The concept of discourse communities is troublesome in that it does not lend itself to easy definition. Yet, we are well served by thinking of a discourse community as **a collective (group) bounded by bodies of knowledge, social norms or conventions, and specific dispositions and practices**. This means that a discourse community **shares an understanding about what is or can be counted as "knowledge," share cultural and social norms, and gravitates towards certain courses of action as more appropriate than others**.

Here is a definition of discourse communities by John Swales, author of *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). According to Swales there are six defining characteristics (necessary and sufficient) to identify a discourse community.

- 1) A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.** The goals must be shared, not the fact that the discourse community treats a particular subject matter. For instance, while some groups in various places might study the same subject, they might not do it with the same goals in mind (1990:25).
- 2) A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.** Members must share a “discursive” method or practice, and recognize that they belong to a particular collectivity (1990:25).
- 3) A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.** You can’t just send a check to support an organization and be considered part of that community, something else must happen (read, discuss, etc.) (1990:26).
- 4) A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.** Swales says: "One of the purposes of this criterion is to question discourse community status for new or newly-emergent groupings. Such groupings need, as it were, to settle down and work out their communicative proceedings and practices before they can be recognized as discourse communities." Essentially, there are many ways to engage in discursive practices, as a community borrows a way to engage in that practice from other communities, they must assimilate that practice and make it their own. Good question: How does the community adopt and assimilate such communicative practices? (1990:27).
- 5) In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis (terms, vocabularies, acronyms, symbols).** These symbolic resources facilitate communication in the community. This “lexis” can be quite confusing to outsiders. As Swales notes: "It is hard to conceive, at least in the contemporary English-speaking world, of a group of well-established members of a discourse community communicating among themselves on topics relevant to the goals of the community and not using lexical items puzzling to outsiders" (1990:26).
- 6) A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and “discoursal” expertise.** There has to be a reasonable balance between new members and experts, in order to make that community be at an “optimal” level. Another good question: how is such a balance achieved? (1990:26).