Characteristics of Writing in Different Disciplines
By Derek Wade

When professionals write in different fields or disciplines, they use the style, tone, and language of their fields. In addition, they have specific purposes for specific audiences. In “The Nature of Things: Biomimicry,” “The Early Days of World War I,” and “Razzle Dazzle: Fashion ‘Stars’—in Stripes,” the writers follow the traditions of the disciplines of science, history, and (fashion) journalism, respectively. In particular, the writers’ purpose, the discipline-specific features, and the reader’s goals are noteworthy in these pieces.

Each of the writers has a distinctive purpose. Lila Hogler’s purpose in “The Nature of Things” is to define biomimicry as “the practice of adopting natural structures and strategies to solve problems.” She fulfills this purpose by going on to explain biomimicry through an easily understood example: the camouflage used by animals such as zebras replicated in camouflage used by humans such as tree-like cell phone towers. In “The Early Days,” Kyle Gibson’s purpose is to narrate a problem situation: German submarines attacked British battleships in the first part of World War I. He fulfills this purpose through describing the solution devised by British artists; “dazzle” (also known as “razzle dazzle”) designs on ships imitated animal camouflage to throw off the German attackers. In “Razzle Dazzle,” Samantha Owens has the purpose of explaining the backstory of why stripes are used in fashion designs. With this purpose in mind, she persuades the reader to wear camouflage stripes as a strategy and make the body appear taller and thinner. Each of the three authors works toward a specific purpose in these articles.

Hogler, Gibson, and Owens fulfill their purposes by employing features specific to their fields of study. For example, Hogler uses the vocabulary of that discipline, including words such as “evolution,” “microbes,” “diversity,” and “organisms.” She describes animal and human behavior and uses figures (images) to illustrate points. Gibson uses chronological organization, narrating events in the order in which they happened. Descriptions of people, places, and events flesh out the story. Owens uses lots of color and images to illustrate the design qualities that form the center point of the piece. In addition, she uses field-specific vocabulary: “go-to tools,” “shapewear,” “cinch,” “stilettos,” “statuesque,” “silhouette,” and “midriff.” When writing in a field of study, professionals use conventions of that field.

When readers examine texts in various fields, they have goals that, ideally, match the writers’ purposes. For instance, the reader who studies a biology article on biomimicry wants to learn about this concept. He or she will study examples of camouflage in order to gain an understanding of how humans imitate animal and plant behavior. A student of history will read the World War I piece to learn an interesting story about a problem and an innovative solution. In doing so, the reader will make connections between problem and solution or cause (submarine attacks) and effect (dazzle camouflage painted on ships). Someone interested in fashion will read an article like “Razzle Dazzle” to learn the origin of a fashion design: stripes. He or she will also connect practices in science and technology (biomimicry) to warfare (dazzle camouflage) to fashion (flattering stripes on garments). Ultimately, the fashion-conscious reader might attain the goal of having a new “go-to tool” for looking taller or thinner: wearing stripes and color-blocked garments. Active readers have goals for their reading activities, and they have certain expectations when they read articles written in and for disciplines.
Writers and readers engage in conversations about disciplines in these texts. Whether they are writing in science, history, fashion design, or some other field of study, professional writers address readers and fulfill purposes in their writing. Readers achieve goals by reading discipline-specific texts. Clearly, the writer’s purpose, the discipline-specific features, and the reader’s goals are distinctive and deliberate in texts written in particular fields of study. Understanding these differences can help us to read and write more critically.