WHAT IS 'GOOD WRITING?' ANALYZING METADISCOURSE AS CIVIL DISCOURSE

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Whenever I can, I ask students and instructors how they would describe "good academic writing." More often than not, they have ready answers, and also several similar ones. Some qualities are genre-specific ("persuasive" for a critical essay, "formulaic" for a lab report), but several are valued across genres. For many students and instructors, these qualities seem to distinguish academic writing from other kinds of writing, and they include that it should cohere—it should "flow" or hang together—and that it should include evidence and a degree of objectivity—it shouldn't be wildly unfounded or biased.

The good news is that students and instructors are right: successful academic writing shares some characteristics regardless of genre or discipline, and these characteristics include explicit coherence and civil treatment of multiple perspectives. The bad news is that often, students and instructors cannot connect these characteristics to written language in a systematic way. They cannot connect labels like *civil* or *coherent* to common choices in their reading or writing.

As a result, even when people feel they "know good writing when they see it" (Lea and Street 163), expectations for good academic writing are often abstract and impressionistic (Duncan and Vanguri). Most U.S. students and instructors have no training in recognizing specific lexical, grammatical choices that help create *coherence* or *civility* and help transfer those choices across contexts. This was not always the case, nor is it the case the world over. In the mid- to late-twentieth century, U.S. writing studies drew on and debated linguistic approaches, as evidenced in sentence-

generation and -combining exercises as well as transdisciplinary discussions at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (Connors; MacDonald). Furthermore, applied linguistics and education traditions including *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP) and *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) continue to integrate grammar and other language knowledge into the teaching of student writing, particularly outside of the U.S. (e.g., Locke; Myhill and Watson; Schleppegrell). But since the mid-1970s, U.S. writing studies has tended to separate macro-level writing expectations and language-level choices, while relatively rare composition research on style, rhetorical grammar, and discourse analysis endeavors to bring them together (Aull "Linguistic Markers"; Barton and Stygall; Butler; Connors; Duncan and Vanguri; Hancock; Lancaster "Academics"; MacDonald; Ross and Rossen-Knill; Vande Kopple "Exploratory").

Among this research, William Vande Kopple's work on metadiscourse made a clear case for how attention to language is integral to understanding writing. Drawing on discourse analysis and linguistics research, Vande Kopple defined metadiscourse as the non-topical language of a text: the language that helps readers "organize, classify, interpret, evaluate, and react to" the topical (or propositional) content ("Exploratory" 83). This definition emphasizes the role of language in the intersubjective construction of meaning: it lets readers know how to understand the writing and the writer. Vande Kopple called for empirical analysis of metadiscourse in authentic texts in order to help writers understand their own and others' writing (87-89). Doing so, Vande Kopple wrote, was a way of helping students discover "how attentive to detail one must be in the study of language and its effects" ("Importance" 40). Vande Kopple wanted to help students engage thoughtfully with language and write more successfully, and these were for him the same endeavor.

Especially important is that Vande Kopple's approach shows us a way to study writing as an ethical sociorhetorical practice. The study of metadiscourse was "interesting and important," he noted, because it illuminates reader-writer negotiations and "intriguing

questions about ethics": metadiscourse shows how writers help readers "connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes" toward writers' ideas, and it poses questions such as "which ways of using metadiscourse with debatable material are fair and just?" ("Importance" 38, 41). As Vande Kopple emphasized, "[E]xploration into the kinds of and effects of metadiscourse might make our students more sensitive to the possibility that particular readers have more specific needs than most of them imagine" ("Exploratory" 89).

In these accounts, Vande Kopple underscores a crucial if subtle premise: understanding writing expectations need not begin with describing those expectations. Rather, understanding writing—even finding it interesting—can begin with analysis of authentic written language, including how it attends to readers' needs. These ideas seem especially relevant today, because they relate to how students navigate school assignments and engage with controversial issues. In particular, analyzing written language in support of transparent connections between expectations and language choices takes on added exigence amid two urgent goals for contemporary education. One is supporting diverse learners with varied language backgrounds, an effort Vande Kopple directly associated with studying metadiscourse ("Importance"; "Refining and Applying Views of Metadiscourse"). The other is supporting civil exchange across different views. While many agree that civil discourse in secondary and college classrooms is crucial, few resources identify what this looks like in academic writing.

In this article, I strive to build on Vande Kopple's work by putting it in dialogue with calls for civil discourse and rhetorical listening, or writing with a stance of openness in relation to other texts and views. Specifically, I explore how two types of metadiscourse—textual and epistemic markers—help open space for readers' needs and potential objections, thereby diverging from unilateral writing that leaves space for the writer only. Together, these textual and epistemic markers cast academic writing as an ethical sociorhetorical practice that engages writers' and readers' cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal needs. While these

markers only constitute some of the ways that writers do so, they also provide visible ways to direct students' attention and to ground instructors' goals in language.

Even as he described its importance, Vande Kopple noted minimal attention to metadiscourse in composition textbooks. He wrote,

> [W]e would hope to find rhetorics and handbooks with unified and comprehensive sections on wise uses of [metadiscourse]. And we would hope that, as far as possible, these discussions would be supported by empirical research and would help us help students to use metadiscourse well in their specific writing tasks. But to the best of my knowledge, no such unified, comprehensive, empirically based, and widely applicable treatment appears in print. ("Exploratory" 87)

This observation largely still stands. But I hope Vande Kopple would have been pleased to see several recent analyses of metadiscourse that build on his work (Ädel; Aull *First-Year*; Aull and Moseley; Ho; Lancaster "Academics"; Lancaster "Exploring"; Lancaster "Tracking"; Lee and Subtirelu; Triki). This article likewise analyzes metadiscourse in authentic texts and offers guidance for such analysis with students, and it specifically builds on Vande Kopple's prescient emphasis on the intersection between metadiscourse and ethical writing. In this spirit, the next section defines terms related to metadiscourse and civil discourse before turning to the analysis.

Definitions and Connections

Defining Metadiscourse

Vande Kopple described two types of metadiscourse that especially underscore intersubjective meaning: textual markers that build organizational meaning, and epistemic markers that build interpersonal meaning. Both offer explicit links between parts of the text and between readers and writers. While there are several

kinds of metadiscourse, I have found these markers particularly accessible for the close attention to language that Vande Kopple advocated, and I limit my focus to these within this article.

First, textual markers help readers see connections and organization of a text: they offer readers links or bridges across sentences and ideas. They include words and phrases such as *first* and *finally* to show sequence, *but* and *however* to show countering claims, and *consequently* to show cause and effect. I call all of these text connectives for simplicity, something Vande Kopple called for in order to make metadiscourse more useful than technical ("Importance" 41).

Text connectives help writers identify textual relationships and accordingly engage with readers' reading needs. Vande Kopple implies that this is one of the benefits of analyzing metadiscourse with students: as students analyze text connectives, they can begin to "understand better the distinction between [the] information in sentences" and the strategies writers use to support readers' understanding (Vande Kopple, 1985, p. 89). They also illuminate cultural-linguistic norms: while academic writing in English regularly includes text connectives, writing in Finnish, for example, uses fewer text connectives to show deference to readers' ability to connect the information (Mauranen). These textual markers highlight writing as a practice that includes connecting information in a collectively coherent way.

Next, epistemic (or epistemology) markers include *hedges* (also called "shields") and *boosters* (also called "emphatics" and "intensifiers"). While there are several ways to modulate epistemic meaning, hedges and boosters are especially well-researched in academic discourse. They provide epistemic cues that signal the space available for others' ideas and for the writers' ideas.

Hedges such as *might* and *somewhat* open space for readers' questions or objections by showing deference and leaving some room for doubt, and a large body of research shows that hedges contribute to a writerly *ethos* of caution, humility, and diplomacy (Hyland "Stance"; Salager-Myer et al.; Vande Kopple "Metadiscourse"). Academic writers also have substantiated ideas

they want to emphasize without equivocation, and in those cases, boosters such as *clearly* or *must* close dialogue, leaving little to no room for doubt (Hyland "Stance"). Deciding when to use boosters can be challenging: research shows, for instance, that late-secondary and early college student writers often overuse boosters relative to experienced academic writers, which can make their writing appear overstated (Aull "Argumentative"; Hinkel; Hyland "Undergraduate Understandings"). In both secondary and college courses, writing characterized by boosted generalizations—e.g., ***People** will **definitely** cheat to get ahead*—tends to be less successful than writing characterized by more hedges and fewer boosted generalizations (Aull and Lancaster; Brown and Aull).

Used in closer equilibrium, however, hedges and boosters can help writers both leave space for others' ideas while advancing their own. A rhetorical balance of opening and closing dialogic space characterizes successful student and published academic writing (Aull *How Students Write*; Lancaster "Exploring"). This balance lets academic writers "register necessary doubts or 'sound small notes of civilized differences'" while also "'underscor[ing] what [they] really believe'" (Vande Kopple "Exploratory" 84).[1]

Defining Civil Discourse

Contemporary calls for civil discourse emphasize the need for informed, open-minded exchange in a time lacking thoughtful public debate (Rodin and Steinberg). Secondary educators suggest that such thoughtful exchange requires "frank discussions" in classrooms, where civil discourse can be modeled and encouraged (Nilsen 68-69). For many, higher education has an especially important role[2]. On behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), Andrea Leskes calls for civil discourse as an "essential" responsibility of higher education and for "the crucial need for colleges and universities to commit strongly to its survival" (1). Leskes describes that civil discourse involves "a serious exchange of views" (3) and "embod[ies] open-mindedness" (4).

Similar descriptions have appeared for some time in rhetoric and composition scholarship, which has championed disciplined inquiry

into alternative explanations (Harrington), arguments as invitations into shared sense-making (Crosswhite), and rhetorical listening, or a stance of openness to views and cultural logics not our own (Ratcliffe). Writing across the curriculum scholars likewise note open-mindedness as an expectation for academic writing regardless of discipline or instructor (Thaiss and Zawacki 5), and openness to new ways of being and thinking is one of the eight habits of mind called for in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. In response to the divisive 2016 presidential election, John Duffy underscored that first-year composition fosters the "rhetorical virtue" of open-mindedness by asking students to write about a range of perspectives other than their own (238). Duffy emphasizes that such open-mindedness need not entail polite deference: it includes "courage in confronting oppression" and addressing injustice (236).

Some scholarship calls for close attention to language as part of these efforts. Alleen Pace Nilsen argues that a singular goal for English classrooms is fostering students' ability to "look on civil language as an important linguistic tool" (68-69). Zak Lancaster's linguistic analysis of academic writing exposes the "interpersonal tact" expected in objections, contrary to the more direct attacks encouraged in popular textbook advice (Lancaster "Academics" 448). Most recently, Aull shows that in first-year and upper-level writing in higher education, instructors value language choices that explicitly acknowledge limitations and objections alongside choices that firmly endorse substantiated ideas. This balance between opening and closing dialogue, Aull writes, shows respect for readers and acknowledgement of the inevitable boundaries of any single written contribution.

In my experience, as students and faculty practice looking for markers of connection, conviction, and caution, they become more attentive to the subtleties of reader-writer connection because they have written footholds to look for that capture these values. After students have some practice in reading these markers, I have them start looking for and/ or adding them in their own writing, annotating them in their drafts just as they annotate them in their

reading. The written footholds become things to both look for and choose to write. Thus reader-writer connection is foregrounded regularly, and is valued even when students can't articulate exactly what they are noticing—e.g., they feel like some connection is made but not exactly what. In those cases, rewriting something, such as by removing text connectives or trying to leave more room for dialogue—e.g., changing *this example shows* to *this example may suggest*—can help students consider and describe the choices they and other writers make (and do not make). Even obvious examples can provide a valuable starting point for moving from vague descriptions of "good writing" to more concrete enactments of what makes writing successful for a specific purpose.

Connecting Metadiscourse and Civil Discourse

The above definitions show compelling overlap between metadiscourse and civil discourse also visible in Vande Kopple's work. In particular, Vande Kopple's discussion of F. R. Leavis' epistemic markers in "The Great Tradition" highlights his concerns about "fair and just" uses of metadiscourse with debatable material ("Importance" 41). Vande Kopple notes Leavis' hedged *uncontroversial* statements and boosted *controversial* statements (Simpson). Drawing on the work of Janet Homes, Vande Kopple wonders whether such use of metadiscourse might be a type of sneaky tactic for presenting propositions as accepted truths rather than the writer's proposed ideas ("Importance" 41).

I was struck by these musings in particular because my first-year writing students have also used the word "sneaky" to describe some uses of hedges and boosters, both in academic writing and on social media. Such perceptions present excellent opportunities for exploring with students Vande Kopple's question about fair uses of metadiscourse. These opportunities build students' awareness of language-level choices and connect such choices to ethical questions about the purpose, audience, and message of written texts. Furthermore, if we consider that textual markers provide explicit links between parts of a text for readers—while epistemic markers provide explicit space for readers' possible doubts—we can see

both kinds of metadiscourse in light of thoughtful accounting for readers' needs. By extension, we can see both as part of writing as a sociorhetorical practice that engages interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive domains of writing by parsing texts and acknowledging multiple perspectives.

Importantly, this does not mean a kind of politeness wherein writers' do not advocate for themselves, inadvertently or otherwise participating in what bell hooks emphasized as dangerous forms of consensus. Indeed, the notion of rhetorical balance—attending to readers' needs and doubts while advancing writers' ideas—has been valuable for helping my students and me to move beyond solitary and combative metaphors for writers and writing. To see how such balance emerges in texts, students can analyze how textual markers support readers' ability to navigate ideas and how epistemic markers both open and close dialogic space.

Analyzing Metadiscourse as Civil Discourse

Building on Vande Kopple's work, I have so far implied that analyzing metadiscourse can help support two important aims for composition. One is supporting students' and instructors' ability to link macrolevel expectations to language-level choices, by focusing on how discourse choices in authentic texts fulfill those expectations. The other is supporting the specific expectations of civil discourse and rhetorical listening in writing, or writing with a stance of openness toward others' ideas.

To illustrate how we might analyze metadiscourse to these ends, in this section, I examine five example passages: one from a first-year student essay, three from the *Atlantic*, and one from an academic book chapter written by Vande Kopple himself. All the passages can be considered formal, expository prose written in standardized American English for an educated audience; they also enact a range of genres that first-year college composition students are often asked to write, peer review, and read: argumentative essay writing aimed at an instructor and imagined general audience; essayistic article writing that address issues of public concern for a non-discipline-specific audience; and academic article or book

writing aimed at an English studies audience. The five passages also represent academic writing in which metadiscourse contributes to a civil stance that leaves space for others' ideas and reading needs.

The first example was written by a student in a first-semester college composition course. The passage appears in an argumentative essay that received an A-level grade, in an assignment that required students to select, research, and write about an important public issue.[3] In the passage, two textual and epistemic markers appear in bold, and other related features are underlined and discussed below.

> Society plays an important role in the way people perceive information. Children learn social rules starting at an early age. Nareissa Smith, **for example**, followed this notion and studied the effects gendered toys and television ads had on children. Boys are expected to play with cars, machines, and science kits while girls have kitchen sets, dolls, and makeup sets (Smith 1000). The different toys promote different roles for each gender to fulfil; boys are to grow up to be scientists and mechanics, while women are to care for their children and their home. Factors as **seemingly** insignificant as toys can alter a perception without them even being aware (Rudman and Phelan 193). Girls, as they begin to become more conscious of the world around them, will implicitly believe that they have certain roles to fulfil in society while the men follow separate paths.

In the opening two sentences of this passage, the student makes claims about the early and pervasive nature of children's socialization into behavioral norms. These are generalized claims: the student applies them widely by using *society* and then *children* as the subjects of these sentences. The reader is not left to dwell on these for long, however. In the next sentence, the writer explicitly directs the reader to evidence using a text connective: "Nareissa Smith, *for example*, followed this notion and studied the effects

gendered toys and television ads had on children." The writer then uses the subsequent sentence to summarize specific findings from this research, followed by an inference about the roles and futures that the findings suggest.

When the student moves to paraphrase more research in sentence five, the use of a hedge opens up space for potential reader doubts: "Factors as *seemingly* insignificant as toys can alter a perception without them even being aware (Rudman and Phelan 193)." Here, the use of the hedge *seemingly* leaves space for readers who may see childhood toys as innocuous while also helping the writer develop the idea that socialization occurs early. After opening dialogic space in this way, the final sentence of the passage states more unequivocally that girls *will…believe* certain things about the world around them based on their childhood socialization. In just a few sentences, this passage offers an example of how even in an overtly argumentative task, writers can highlight both their ideas and their rhetorical openness toward others: the writer draws on other sources, uses metadiscourse markers to guide readers and acknowledge potential doubts, and articulates the writer's own position.

Next, consider three widely-read articles from *The Atlantic*, all of which present claims with which readers might disagree. Analyzing them, I especially focus on how the writers use hedges and concessions to anticipate objections while using countering text connectives to present their own stance.

The first passage appears in "The Case for Reparations" by Ta-Nahesi Coates.[6]

> The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago. The humiliation of Whites Only signs are gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen-pregnancy rates are at record lows—and the gap between black and white teen-pregnancy rates has shrunk significantly. **But** such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere. The income gap between black and white households is **roughly** the same today as it was in 1970.

> Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University, studied children born from 1955 through 1970 and found that 4 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks across America had been raised in poor neighborhoods. A generation later, the same study showed, **virtually** nothing had changed. And whereas whites born into affluent neighborhoods **tended to** remain in affluent neighborhoods, blacks **tended to** fall out of them.

As is clear from the full paragraph, Coates ultimately wants to argue that more change is needed to improve black American lives. But first, he begins with a concession to a possible objection: that black lives are better than they used to be (or to the related objection that writers should focus on positive progress rather than calling for more change); notably, this opening sentence includes *no* hedges or boosters, perhaps underscoring that it is not debatable and not the focus of Coates' discussion. After three sentences of concession, Coates begins to develop his alternative view: that improvements to black American lives rest on "a shaky foundation," and that there are cracks in these improvements *everywhere*. The text connective *but* is a metadiscourse clue to these moves and ideas. As is often the case in academic writing, a concession appears just before the *but*, and the countering claims begin just after it.

As Coates develops his countering claims, he draws in another source to support these ideas (Patrick Sharkey), and he also hedges several claims to leave space for readers' possible objections or doubts: the use of *roughly* leaves room for examples in which the income gap has changed; the use of "*virtually* nothing" leaves room for some degree of change in some places; and his use of *tended* to in the final sentence leaves space for exceptions regarding blacks and whites in affluent neighborhoods. Thus Coates' writing in this passage captures three strategies for writing with a civil stance of openness: he concedes possible reader objections in the first part of the passage, he draws in another source in the middle of the passage, and he hedges his final sentences of the paragraph in order to leave space open for doubts and exceptions.

A second article example appears in "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" by Nicholas Carr.[5]

> For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. The advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they've been widely described and duly applauded. "The perfect recall of silicon memory," *Wired's* Clive Thompson has written, "can be an enormous boon to thinking." **But** that boon comes at a price. As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, **but** they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net **seems** to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles.

This passage offers another example where the metadiscursive *but* offers a clue for the full paragraph: before *but* appears Carr's concession to what readers might think about the internet, and after *but* appear Carr's countering claims. Both in his concession and in his counter, Carr draws in other sources.

First, Carr concedes that the Internet is becoming *universal* and has many *advantages* that are *duly applauded*. All of these words have positive connotation, and with them, Carr concedes the popular view that the internet has many positive benefits. As part of his concession, he cites Clive Thompson. Then, as did Coates, Carr begins his counter with the text connective *but*. At that point, Carr begins to describe that these positive outcomes also come with consequences, and he draws in another source (Marshall McLuhan) to support this perspective. He then offers another sentence that concedes and counters around the text connective *but*—"They supply the stuff of thought, *but* they also shape the process of thought." Carr then notes his own experiences as part of his claim

that the internet is negatively shaping the way we think, offering himself as evidence of the claims he makes. As he develops these countering claims, Carr uses the hedge *seems* to, leaving space for alternative views about the impact of the internet.

In one more example from the *Atlantic*, Julian Zelizer and Morton Keller discuss the controversial topic of President Trump's relationship with the press. Zelizer opens the discussion[4]:

> After President Trump's rally last weekend there has been a lot of talk about how his predecessors viewed the press. Trump reminded his audience that many others before him have also expressed harsh words for journalists. It **seems** that Trump is not wrong. From Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln to FDR to Barack Obama, it has been conventional for presidents to complain, criticize and even attack the media for the way that they cover politics. [...]
> **Yet it seems to me**... that there are important differences between what we are seeing with Trump compared to what we have seen with other presidents in years gone by.

Here, Zelizer first offers context for the debate and, with some detail, concedes Trump's view that *many* presidents have criticized the press. Zelizer's concession includes the hedge *seems* and is followed by a counter, which begins with *yet* and also includes a hedge (*it seems to me*). These choices leave open space for dialogue and objection even as Zelizer advances a countering perspective.

Finally, consider a passage from Vande Kopple's own work. This is the most formal academic piece of the examples, in that it appears in an academic edited collection and is written primarily for a field-specific audience. In this passage, Vande Kopple presents findings from a study co-authored with Avon Crismore on student response to hedges in textbooks.

> These studies had what are **perhaps** surprising results. In the case of both the science and the social studies material, the students who learned the most were **not** those who read the

> unshielded versions; **rather**, the ones who learned the most were those who read a version with shields in the personal voice, with lesser frequency, and in the second half of the passage. …
>
> Many different elements **probably** play a role in a complete explanation of these findings. **But** Crismore and Vande Kopple highlight the fact that, as measured by pre-reading questionnaires, **some** students had negative attitudes toward the social studies material and many students had negative attitudes toward the science material. In such a situation, hedges **might** be viewed as welcome additions to texts because they alert readers that the texts are expressions of opinions or hypotheses, not expressions of widely sanctioned information. (Vande Kopple "Metadiscourse" 105-106)

In this passage, Vande Kopple first suggests that the studies had "what are *perhaps* surprising results," using the hedge *perhaps* to avoid assuming the reader's agreement that the results were surprising. In the subsequent sentence, Vande Kopple guides the reader through a surprising finding with the help of metadiscourse: first, he presents expected results that were *not* the results, followed by the text connective *rather* to lead into the actual results: that students learned the most from reading textbooks that included hedges, especially in the second half of the passage.

In the next paragraph, Vande Kopple offers more explanation for the study results, first by offering a hedged concession: he concedes that many elements *probably* explain the study results. He then counters this view—that there may be no clear, single explanation—with the text connective *but*. As Vande Kopple goes on to advance his own explanation, he hedges the claim (about hedges!) with the use of *might*. This use of the hedge *might* allows Vande Kopple to leave room for doubt about this explanation, since he cannot prove that students learned more because they welcomed the use of hedges in the textbook passages.

Of course, there is much more to civil discourse than only these choices. But if we agree that civil discourse includes respectful dialogue across multiple views, and we believe that college campuses are sites for preserving such values, then we can think about writing in any field and genre as a site for identifying not only shared values of civility but also how these values are manifest in language. Such additional ways of noticing and reinforcing civil discourse can help make civility more concrete, less abstract, more rooted in small but continual choices we make.

Analyzing and Writing Civil Metadiscourse with Students

Students and I consider civil metadiscourse beginning with short, paragraph-length passages. I tell students to focus more on what they notice than on trying to get the annotations "right"—they will get better with practice, and often, words and phrases do multiple rhetorical things at once.

First, I ask students to pick an interesting or puzzling paragraph or two from the course reading for the day, and we talk through its overall message. Then I ask them to annotate the paragraph(s) with guidance like the following.

- Find any words or sentences that explicitly draw in other voices or views. Mark these with single brackets.
    - For instance, I have brackets around the sentence beginning "As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s," because this sentence cites another view.
- Find any words or sentences that seem especially written to guide you, the reader, through the text. Mark these with double brackets.
    - For instance, I have double brackets around the phrase *for example* because it lets me know that what is coming is an example.
- Find any sentences or phrases that seem absolute to you, meaning that they don't seem to leave any room for doubt or exceptions. Mark these with a single arrow in the margin. These might be generalizations or statements that seem very certain.

• Within those sentences, draw a box around any words that you think indicate that they are absolute or definitive.

o For instance, I have a box around *society* because this sentence doesn't leave room for possible exceptions within a society, and I have a box around the word *clearly* because it makes it seem like the idea is clear and certain.

• Find any sentences or phrases that seem like the opposite of absolute ones: they leave some room for doubt or exceptions or possible alternatives. Mark these with two arrows in the margin.

• Within those sentence, draw a circle around any words that you think make these sentences less absolute.

o For instance, I have a circle around *might be viewed as* because it suggests that we could view something that way but we don't have to.

At first, most students only mark a few, obvious phrases in a text, such as *however* and *perhaps*, and they are often concerned with whether they have marked what I have. But this starts to change once we go over a few passages in groups and as a class and students start to do the annotations as they read. Quickly, students begin to increase their annotations and describe in more detail what they notice and how it guides the reader or adjusts the writer's ideas. Students help each other through this growth: I had a student explain to her group that hedges were what you use when you want to tell people that you're dating someone, but you don't want to overdo it—you say "we're *sort of* dating" or "we're *sort of* hanging out." For the rest of the term, several members of the class described what they called "sort of" words that they noted when they read. I help them too, posing questions such as "Why doesn't the hedge weaken the argument here? Why would the writer show doubt?", to which students respond with reasonable inferences—that if something isn't proven or seems debatable, a writer will actually weaken their credibility or insult the reader by overstating the claim.

After we have practiced these steps two or three times, students do the same analysis of their own writing, on anything from a free

writing piece from class to their own and their peers' writing assignment drafts. Based on the patterns they see in their annotations, they make changes or suggested changes in order to achieve different kinds of reader-writer connection, making marginal notes about the changes they made and why. Because they begin by noting metadiscourse in their reading and the effect it has on them as readers, making the same annotations and related adjustments in their writing helps reinforce connection between reading like a writer and writing like one.

There are many things that I find compelling about this kind of analysis with students that I think Vande Kopple experienced as well. It puts students in the role of analyst, with concrete footholds for reading like writers. It turns course reading material and students' writing into resources for understanding writing. And it highlights ethical writing practices, in which writers do not write in a vacuum and do not take readers' agreement for granted—writers draw on other voices, and they guide readers in a process of thoughtful, intersubjective meaning-making. Particularly in recent years, I have felt that this kind of analysis with students is a way of advocating for civil exchange of ideas in a time it is sorely needed.

Concluding Remarks

I opened this article by describing a disconnect between macrolevel writing expectations and language-level writing choices, a disconnect directly challenged by Vande Kopple's approach to metadiscourse. In subsequent sections, I aimed to carry on Vande Kopple's challenge by analyzing metadiscourse in authentic texts vis-à-vis writing as an ethical sociorhetorical practice. In this vein, I focused on textual and epistemic markers that help writers show attention to others even as they develop their own ideas. I want to close by underscoring the importance of similar work in future composition research and teaching. Specifically, I want to highlight some reasons that connecting macrolevel expectations and language choices is empowering for composition students as well as instructors.

Connecting expectations and language adds systematicity to grading and instruction: it challenges the sense that grading is entirely subjective (that "every instructor wants something different") and integrates grammar and language beyond discussions of error and revision. Connecting expectations and language makes writing assessment more transparent, because it links assessment standards to possible language choices for achieving them. Perhaps most important, connecting writing expectations and language choices challenges the notion that standardized written academic English is impenetrable and superior, rather than what it is—a set of strategies with sociorhetorical advantages and disadvantages like any language use. In this way, connecting expectations and language can help challenge the oft-noted "gap between the teaching of writing as conjectured by theorists and its actual practice" (Cunningham 36) by connecting theoretical support for language diversity to practical, descriptive approaches to language.

Connecting writing expectations and language choices, in other words, presents academic writing as discoverable and knowable—a thing to be analyzed rather than policed—for all students. And it thereby creates opportunities for recognizing and enacting civil discourse through language choices that make space for both readers and writers. Such connections help us follow Vande Kopple's example of turning to language to better understand writing as an ethical sociorhetorical practice.

Notes

[1]Quote from Joseph William's *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, pp. 49-50.

[2]See, e.g., articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Audrey June and Christopher Mooney, respectively. Some universities have launched research and community centers for addressing public discourse and civil discourse, e.g., the University of Connecticut(humilityandconviction.uconn.edu/2019/04/16/civility-and-civil-discourse-in-an-age-of-divisiveness/) and the University of Arizona (nicd.arizona.edu/). Earlier examples include Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg's *Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century*. See also Davies, "Post-Truth Politics"; Duffy, "Post-Truth."

[3]See Aull "Argumentative" for more detail about the course context and assignment as well as more example passages.

[4]For full published text, see: www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/.

[5]For full published text, see: www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/.

[6]For full discussion, see www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/historians-weigh-in-on-trump/517515/.

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