



Journal Editorial: “A Gradient Invisible—Blurring Disciplines Through Undergraduate Research”

Eleanor Wakefield*

I usually begin my Introduction to Poetry classes with the Howard Nemerov poem "Because You Asked About the Line Between Prose and Poetry":

Sparrows were feeding in a freezing drizzle
That while you watched turned to pieces of snow
Riding a gradient invisible
From silver aslant to random, white, and slow.
There came a moment that you couldn't tell.
And then they clearly flew instead of fell.¹

I will not discuss the poem at length, but I will point to the key image that we discuss at the beginning of each new poetry class: the “gradient invisible” that separates and connects drizzle and snow. The poem asks where and what the distinction is, drawing a connection to the title’s question about the line between prose and poetry. In short, it can be hard to see quite when one form ends and the other begins; there are phases during which it might be both.

The hazy, sleety space between prose and poetry described in this poem, I suggest, is also an analogy that illuminates the relationships between many of our campus disciplines, and the types of work our undergraduate students (and especially researchers) do. Part of the joy of the undergraduate experience exists within the blurry lines between and among different disciplines, and in the exciting, blended spaces where we learn and innovate.

Though I get to teach Introduction to Poetry every couple of years, most of the classes I teach are academic writing courses—both those required for all UO students and those required only for some majors, like Scientific and Technical Writing. These classes open the door for me to participate in and mentor undergraduate research from a different angle than many of my colleagues; students come to me with projects at various stages that they will continue with me and that they need to share with an audience (even if that audience is just me, because the assignment is for my class), and writing allows us to share our work with others. Moreover, a strong relationship between the research project and effective writing skills allows a researcher to achieve their goals in many ways: proposing a project that is both well-designed and persuasively pitched, documenting the process so others can replicate the research, grounding the project in the existing literature, conveying results, and more.

Even outside of classes specifically focused on writing, we see students and faculty all over campus working across disciplines to innovate and, crucially, communicate those innovations to a wider audience. In my Scientific and Technical Writing class over the past couple of years, we have been lucky to have guest speakers introduce us to a wide variety of instances of using writing in scientific and technical fields; one is the Science and Comics Initiative, where faculty members are paired with student comic artists to create comics about their scientific research. This is an especially fun example of

¹ Howard Nemerov, “Because You Asked about the Line Between Prose and Poetry,” in *Sentences*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

*Eleanor Wakefield has a PhD in poetry and poetics. Her dissertation, “*Extending the Line: Early Twentieth-Century American Women’s Sonnets*,” reads poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, and Helene Johnson. She has taught writing and literature at the University of Oregon since 2010, and elsewhere since 2008. She is the co-editor of the “*Politics of Sports*” casebook/textbook. She also serves as the secretary for United Academics.

crossdisciplinarity, scientific collaboration that involves the humanities directly (the Comics Studies Minor is housed in the English department), and I encourage people unfamiliar with the initiative to check it out; reading these student comics or exploring other comics about science can be both fun and edifying. And similar projects and collaborations are happening all over our campus, from individual students finding connections between and among their classes to entire departments coming together to create shared minors and other programs.

The opportunity for undergraduate students to participate in research is known to be transformative: students who develop their own projects, students who join ongoing faculty research projects, and students who are involved in undergraduate research in other capacities frequently develop skills, interests, and relationships that improve their undergraduate experiences. But when we think of research as interdisciplinary inherently, and when we think of writing as an essential piece of the research process, we further empower undergraduate researchers to plan, implement, document, and share their important work with other people. Sharing our work adds to an ongoing conversation among students, scholars, and humanity more broadly. Participating in knowledge generation—literally adding to what people know—is some of the most exciting work any of us can do. And we add our work to the figurative library of what is known by writing it down and sharing it.

I can talk much more about writing in and across disciplines, but for my purposes here, I want to reiterate these main points: all of our work bridges disciplines, and the lines between them are often blurry (and even arbitrary); our core education curriculum benefits all of us as scholars and researchers; and the humanities, writing in particular (because that is my main teaching area), are a bigger part of our campus research life than we sometimes remember. OURJ is an exciting space to engage with undergraduate research, including strong, effective student writing; it is a joy to immerse ourselves in these student projects and products, and I hope as you dive into this issue, you think about the role of writing and other disciplines in research more than you might have otherwise.