A Promising Candidate: An Exploration of Graduate Matriculation Genres

Megan D. Bishop Gervais
University of Maine, megan.bishop@maine.edu

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A PROMISING CANDIDATE: AN EXPLORATION OF
GRADUATE MATRICULATION GENRES

By
Megan D. Bishop Gervais
B.S. English, Husson University, 2013

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Advisory Committee:

Dylan Dryer, Associate Professor of Composition Studies, Advisor
Ryan Dippre, Assistant Professor & Associate Director of College Composition
Charlsye Smith Diaz, Associate Professor & Director of Professional and Technical Communication
Steven R. Evans, Associate Professor of English and New Writing Series Coordinator
THESIS ACCEPTANCE STATEMENT

On behalf of the Graduate Committee for Megan Bishop Gervais, I affirm that this manuscript is the final and accepted thesis. Signatures of all committee members are on file with the Graduate School at the University of Maine, 42 Stodder Hall, Orono, Maine.

Dylan B. Dryer, Associate Professor of English 1 August 2016
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This study emerges from the author’s personal experience of interacting with unfamiliar genres as she prepared her application for a graduate program in English. In a liminal space between graduating from her undergraduate program and applying for admission to a graduate program, her interaction with graduate admission genres was fraught with tension and a lack of the assumed knowledge that would inform her on how to strategically interact with these genres. This lack of tacit knowledge and absence of scaffolding lead her to compose a “statement of purpose” that did not adequately demonstrate that she was a “promising” graduate student, possibly indicating that facets of the “statement of purpose” genre might affect some populations of candidates for graduate admissions. Thus, in an effort to better understand this experience, she studies graduate matriculation genres and asks (1) what genres are most commonly asked for in matriculation assessment examinations?, (2) what kinds of writing does the “statement of purpose” genre promote?, and (3) what are the hidden or occluded tensions that might then hinder student performance with the “statement of purpose?”
122 public institutions are studied to reach a consensus on the current canon of matriculation genres for graduate English programs. The genre of the “statement of purpose” is further analyzed through a recursive coding process and analysis of these codes to cultivate an understanding of what conventions this genre consists of and what kinds of writing this genre promotes. This knowledge will then give stakeholders a better understanding of this genre and how it functions, informing their future interactions with this genre. The author finds that five genres are most commonly required in application for graduate programs: GPA/Transcripts, Letters of Recommendation, GRE General Test, Writing Sample, and “Statement of Purpose.” After her analysis of codes used in “statement of purpose” prompts, she finds which codes are most commonly used, indicating that length-driven writing is promoted and asking candidates to most commonly discuss her/his purposes, goals, and interests. She further finds that there is a tension around the inclusion of the “personal” in a “statement of purpose,” indicating an invisible tension that candidates might encounter when applying to graduate programs, creating another possible barrier to their composition of this text.

The author ends with a discussion on the lack of scaffolding in these prompts, which suggests prompt designers assume that candidates have a understanding of expectations and tensions when some populations of candidates (such as candidates from low SES or from racial minorities) may not have this tacit understanding, leading to these candidates being in a position in which they are unable to construct a “statement of purpose” that adequately reflects their “goodness of fit” and “potential” to be a successful graduate student. As a result of this assumed knowledge, these candidates’ texts might potentially lead to qualified candidates being turned down for admissions.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Martha, my mother-in-law, who believed in me and this thesis more than most people have. Thank you for wanting to hear about this project and for listening so responsively. I am forever grateful for your enthusiasm and support throughout the time I have known you. You will forever be missed.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis has emerged from my own experience of struggling in a transitionary, or liminal, space in which I interacted with graduate admissions genres to demonstrate that I could do what would be expected of me, that I was driven enough to push through obstacles, and hoped to demonstrate that even if I was perceived to be unprepared, that my resilience, or my determination to work through complications and compromising situations to accomplish what I intend to, could and would help me to work harder in order to earn a master’s degree. To me, it is this quality of being “resilient” that gives me the potential to be “promising.” While “promising” might carry more than one meaning, I take this word, as it is used in the phrase “a promising graduate student,” to indicate the capability or perceived capability to be or do something, perhaps with more training or knowledge. This study also pursues an interest in understanding more about the admissions process and how these genres work to aid the admissions committee in making decisions on candidates. However, to understand more about my liminal experience of applying to graduate school, it may prove helpful to have some context of the community (my undergraduate program) that I was leaving, because the ideas and genres that I practiced as an undergraduate affected the experience of interacting with the new genres required in admissions applications to postgraduate study.

By the close of my undergraduate program, I was prepared to have written and verbal conversations about texts (mostly novels, short stories, and poetry) and the way the authors designed characters or metaphors and used strategies to do something to/for the reader. I was prepared for these tasks, because the knowledge was made accessible to
me as an English scholar, meaning that I was taught, had conversations about, and was provided with enough scaffolding to have access to this knowledge to practice. I took creative writing classes when I had the opportunity to do so and even had an internship with the writing center, where I was given the responsibility to be a student coordinator.

In the classes that prepared me for writing center work, I learned how to have conversations with scholars about their writing and learned what makes an “effective” essay, so that I could give “better” advice. With the knowledge I had, the “best” advice I could give was to provide advice centered on the demands of prompts and rubrics and what I learned from Williams and Colomb’s (2010) *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, which in many cases had conflicting information with the other genres I encountered in the writing center. While much of what I learned by working in the writing center was very helpful for my later work as an instructor, the constructs of what made an “effective” essay were narrow constructs that I worked to apply to other genres I encountered through the Writing Center. For instance, in an “effective” essay, punctuation was considered extremely important, as were reference/work cited pages, having at least one quote in each paragraph, and not ending a paragraph with a citation. These example criteria for an “effective” essay were bolstered by instructors’ rubrics and writing prompts that scholars would bring in with their texts. However, these narrow constructs didn’t easily align with each genre I encountered. With the example of not ending a paragraph with a citation, this rule does not apply in the same way to fields associated with APA empirical research. In most of these disciplines, it is commonplace to end with a citation when paraphrasing another’s work. In retrospect, I now know that the lack of this criterion does not make an essay less “effective” and that these descriptors
(“effective,” “good,” and “better”) are more complicated and problematic in light of the experiences and knowledge I now have. However, in undergraduate, these terms were being used normally to discuss writing, and this discourse became entrenched in my ways of writing, thinking, and talking about writing.

While there were classes in which I learned about how to research scholarship and incorporate it into an essay to establish more authorial “ethos,” I was not prepared for the complex responsibility of research (scholarly or empirical), because knowledge on how to conduct empirical research was not made as accessible to me. There were no upper level classes in my undergraduate experience that worked to prepare me for the complex field I was encouraged to enter. Of the few classes offered, Rhetoric and Composition I and II (freshman composition courses) were two classes in which we were explicitly prompted to practice writing strategies and asked to write in various genres such as the “personal essay,” “ethnographic essay,” “précis,” etc. However, these classes did not ask me to engage in the empirical study of writing or studying the empirical research done on rhetorical genre studies (McCarthy (1987/2014); Beaufort (1999); Wardle (2004); Roozen (2010); Reiff and Bawarshi (2011)), which could have better equipped me in transferring knowledge of familiar genres to new and unfamiliar genres, like the ones I would encounter in graduate admissions. While the topic of increasing course offerings for upperclassmen to prepare English scholars for possible later work (like graduate studies in Composition) is an important conversation, the topic of matriculation genres that candidates for graduate studies encounter was of most interest to me, as my own experience with these genres was fraught, and because of my experience with these
genres occurred, I then speculate that there might be facets of this genre that could affect the matriculation of other candidates for graduate admissions.

Prior to my experience with graduate matriculation examinations, I had professors tell me that I should move on to an MA English program. Their encouragement to move into graduate programs established a trust in my learned abilities and, in a sense, that I was prepared for the work I was looking to take on in graduate school. When I applied to my program, a “statement of purpose” was required. I had a prior experience with this genre when I had written my first “statement of purpose” for application to my undergraduate program; I made the mistake of following clues of the generic conventions I had picked up in movies (my only experience of this genre).

One movie in particular that played a major role in my understanding of this genre was *Spanglish*. In the opening scene of this film, we see the Princeton University admissions committee members flipping through application files and reading “statements of purpose.” Voices of candidates and their “statements of purpose” seem to indicate that the prompt for this “statement of purpose” asked candidates to discuss someone of influence on their lives. As one of the committee members abruptly closes one file, seemingly unsatisfied, she then comes across the application file of Cristina Moreno, the narrator. Moreno’s voice begins a voiceover of her “statement of purpose:” “To the Dean of Admission, Princeton University, from Cristina Moreno. Most influential person, my mother, no contest! I think I have been pointing towards this essay ever since the day twelve years ago in Mexico when my father left….” (*Spanglish*, Bradshaw, Haubegger, & Brooks, 2004). These first moments of the film provide the

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1 Because there are many names being used to describe this genre, I have elected to use “statement of purpose,” the most commonly used name, signified by quotation marks, to signify this genre as a whole.
narrative framework that leads the audience to become interested in Cristina Moreno’s mother, Flor, who leaves Mexico with her daughter to provide Cristina with more opportunities. And to me, Moreno’s narration provided me with the generic clue that a “statement of purpose” could be narrative and personal.

As the story develops, the viewer follows Flor and Cristina from Mexico to California, where after years of living in the comfort of her primarily Hispanic populated California community, leaves to work for a Caucasian family, leading to later complexities between Cristina and Flor, such as the question that Flor asks her daughter towards the end of the film. Cristina narrates, “She [Flor] expressed regret that she had to ask me to deal with the basic question of my life at such a young age. Then she asked it. ‘Is what you want for yourself to become someone very different than me?’” And this question causes Cristina to deal with the question of cultural assimilation and identity, a very personal experience. As the film and Cristina’s essay come to a close, she narrates:

I have been overwhelmed by your encouragement to apply to your university and your list of scholarships available to me. Though as I hope this essay shows, your acceptance, while it would thrill me, will not define me. My identity rests firmly and happily on one fact: I am my mother’s daughter. (Spanglish, Bradshaw, Haubegger, & Brooks, 2004)

As this experience might show, I saw the “statement of purpose” as a text I could use to tell part of my story and discuss one or possibly more facets of my identity.

These clues suggested that a “statement of purpose” was an inspiring and lengthy monologue or narrative account about the struggles and obstacles you have overcome, including some details of why you are unique and stand out amongst the many
candidates. However a friend, who had written this genre previously, advised me to just answer all the questions and follow all directions that are in the prompt. And in response, I grudgingly rewrote my undergraduate “statement of purpose” to reflect this advice. So as I sat down to compose a “statement of purpose” for graduate school, I remembered this advice as I turned toward the second “statement of purpose” (but my first graduate “statement of purpose”) I had ever written.

Before proceeding with my experience with this genre and the writing prompt I encountered, it will be useful to discuss current research on writing prompts, as prompts are a central focus of this project. There have been some scholars who have worked towards a better understanding of assignment prompts and how writers respond to particular prompt features through their uptake of a response text (such as the placement essay in Aull (2015) or the “argument” in Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa (2016). A discussion of their work will help to orient the work to follow throughout this study. Aull (2015) and Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa (2016) will help us work towards an understanding of the influential facets of writing/assignment prompts, to give context to the prompt I responded to and those I analyze in this study. Both of these texts work with the Freadman’s (1994, 2002) notion of uptake, which can be described as genres creating “socio-rhetorical conditions for other genres to take up in response, such as a jury’s findings creating the conditions that a judge’s sentencing takes up” (Miller et al., 2016, p. 13), or how an assignment prompt creates conditions for a writer to take up a genre, such as an essay, in response.

In Aull’s (2015) analysis of First-Year Writing (FYW) students’ placement essays and the prompts that facilitated the uptake of these genres, she finds that certain features
of the prompt (e.g. the solicitation of personal evidence and open-ended questions) influence the performance of the FYW genre. Aull recommends the use of descriptive and linguistic attention to student and expert texts in designing prompts, noting that attention to these texts will help prompt designers work towards designing a prompt that will facilitate the uptake of the expected social action. This implication emerges as she finds that the potential expected social act to posit “the author’s argument as one view amongst many” is not facilitated by the open-ended questions found in two of the seven analyzed prompts (p. 9); as both prompt genres share the open-ended question in response to a quote or source text, this prompt feature invokes the uptake of an opinion-based response commonly required in standardized assessment essay sections, a very different genre than that expected of the student writers.

Miller et al. (2016) reinforce Aull’s recommendations, as their study finds that the intertextual relationship, or the relationship between genres, is crucial not only for academic writing but for the design of prompts. They analyze student texts, written in response to history assignment prompts, through coding, and analyze the instructor's wording in the prompts to understand what genres the prompt language creates conditions for. The researchers find that variations in prompt language create conditions for different genres, and while the history instructor expected his students to produce “arguments,” some of his prompts created conditions for other genres, resulting in many non-argumentative uptakes. Miller et al. (2016) also find that the source text being paired with the assignment can either facilitate the expected genre uptake or cause difficulties for students taking up the expected genre, finding that a lack of argument in the source text creates conditions for writers to interpret and analyze (key rhetorical moves in argument
composition). They suggest that instructors or prompt designers be mindful of the pairing of source text to assignment and to construct a prompt in a way that makes the “expected genre clear to students” (p. 22). These recommendations by Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa (2016) are suggestions to improve the alignment between the expected uptake, “assignment design, and the writing students produce” (p. 22). These texts by Aull (2015) and Miller et al. (2016) point to the fact that facets of writing/assignment prompts have an impact on how students uptake genres in response.

Before proceeding with my response to the University of Maine’s graduate admissions prompt (and my later discussions of transparent and tacit knowledge), creating a shared knowledge of what I mean by “tacit knowledge” would prove pertinent in light of this phrase being used throughout this text to better understand what candidates encounter when they are tasked to respond to a prompt. Tacit knowledge can be identified as knowledge that is inherently understood and cannot be accessed easily by outsiders, especially as this knowledge is not easily codified, and thus is often left unarticulated. As it is employed in this study, it can be defined as inherent knowledge operationalized by those in positions of privilege to having access to this knowledge and not easily accessed by outsiders without similar experiences or resources working to scaffold them to understanding this knowledge. For example, as demonstrated through Eaton’s (2009) article guiding graduate candidates to crafting applications to Technical Communication programs, there are many tacitly understood conventions and expectations for the genre of the “personal statement.”

Eaton (2009) provides advice such as “[d]on’t share too much demographic information” and “avoid anecdotes – they quickly turn saccharine and they nearly always
highlight when the applicant was younger and more naïve.” (p. 166). While she advises to avoid anecdotes, she makes a point to note that anecdotes are very different than “thoughtful explanations of professional or academic experience that relate to future studies,” which she notes “can and should be included” (p. 166). While this information can be considered very helpful in preparing a candidate for crafting a “personal statement” or “statement of purpose,” the complex meaning of “personal” or the understanding of what this genre is seeking to accomplish are examples of knowledge that is “tacit” to the prompt designers and/or the graduate admissions committee members, who operate with this knowledge. Eaton (2009) articulates this knowledge for candidates, providing this knowledge to candidates who have accessibility to this text, perhaps through connections who have direct access to this text or the knowledge of how to find such texts through their undergraduate’s resources. And this potential lack of this knowledge, and the unawareness that such knowledge exists can have ramifications for certain populations of candidates who might not share experiences or have accessibility to the same resources as those who have this privilege as they encounter admissions prompts and prepare their applications.

In my application to the University of Maine’s English program, I encountered the following prompt:

Compose a brief essay on a separate page (300-500 words), to be read by professors in your field on your academic and personal intentions and objectives. Identify any special interest you would like to pursue now or in the future. If you have previously attended another graduate school, explain why you wish to
transfer to Maine. Attach essay on separate page, or email attachment to graduate@maine.edu. (The University of Maine).

This prompt sourced from the University of Maine is not transparent on the expectations behind the wording, and as illustrated through Miller et al.’s (2016) study, clear genre expectations help facilitate the uptake of expected genres. The researchers note that “[w]hen genre expectations are not made explicit, students must ‘draw upon the same … knowledge of genre that the test constructor did’ in order to successfully ‘decode’ prompts (Horowitz, 1989, p. 23), and L2 writers in particular may not have such knowledge” (Miller et al., 2016). I would add that in addition to L2 writers, other populations such as those affected by (for example) socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and culture, would also lack such tacit knowledge that would help her/him in “decoding” the prompt.

As I prepared to draft my “statement of purpose” in response to this prompt, I did as I had learned through undergraduate practice and ignored the word limit and instead wrote as I wanted to, including whatever details I felt were pertinent and used the strategies of pathos, ethos, and logos (skills promoted and learned in Rhetoric and Composition I) to write an essay I liked and thought would get me into the program, and hopefully a teaching assistantship. However, as I looked at my essay, knowing that I had certainly surpassed the 300-500 word limit, I began deleting and trying to fit my essay into a smaller frame. I also got feedback from a professor, who instructed me to include quotations to show what works I drew from. I tried to include some quotations, but it was difficult. I didn’t know if the professors in my field would know who I was quoting or know why, and I didn’t really have the space to expand on why I chose their works to
include in my “statement of purpose.” Including these quotations also meant I needed to take out more of my own words. This meant that my available space to write was limited by rhetorical demands I encountered in the prompt and externally from other sources.

I did many revisions, but looking back, I had more complications against me than being concise. I had worked really hard to answer every question in the prompt in as few words as possible, but I didn’t know who I was writing for. While, “professors in your field” gave me the idea that they would be English professors, I didn’t know them. I didn’t know “my field.” I wasn’t entirely sure what the “Rhetoric and Composition” field was or who the scholars of this field were. I had no idea what their mission was, what scholarship they had already discovered, or what questions were still being churned over in conversations. As I wrote my “statement of purpose,” it hadn’t occurred to me that the “professors in … [my] field” might be having different conversations than my professors from undergraduate. I needed to situate myself in a community that I didn’t really know, and I didn’t have any resources or scaffolding to guide me on how to do this work in my “statement of purpose.” Without a nuanced understanding of my audience, it was particularly difficult to understand how the words in the prompt took on more nuanced meanings that I would need to keep in mind while composing my “statement of purpose,” and I was not even aware of these difficulties.

Essentially, the prompt was generic in its requests, and this lack of specificity indicates some assumptions about my knowledge of this genre, my assumed shared knowledge of wording used in the prompt, and my assumed knowledge on expectations I should meet. This reliance on me having this tacit knowledge, resulted in an uptake that did not match the unstated expectations of the prompt (see Coffin, 2006 from Miller et
Without the scaffolding I needed, these assumptions left me in a position in which I struggled to write anything other than something “generic” that would show that I was unimpressive and unprepared. For example, the prompt requests for candidates to “[i]dentify any special interest you would like to pursue now or in the future.” In retrospect, I realize that I seemed to interpret “special interest” as something that I am interested in and chose to write about my interest in teaching, which I was hoping to pursue once I was matriculated and in the future. However, with my current knowledge of the department that I was matriculated into, I see that with more scaffolding, I might have interpreted “special interest” as indicating interests like research areas or topics that I would like to pursue in my graduate studies, which might have been more aligned with the expectations of the “professors in…[my] field.”

This concept of scaffolding, which is an important concept in this study, is defined differently across scholarship (van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen, 2010). In van de Pol et al.’s synthesis and overview of scholarship on scaffolding, they write that “[s]caffolding highlights one of the key aspects of children’s learning, namely that it is often ‘guided by others’ (Stone, 1998a, p. 351)” (van de Pol et al., p. 271). This metaphor of scaffolding, as it is often used in scholarship and experiences of education and learning, can be understood as the “temporary support provided for the completion of a task that learners otherwise might not be able to complete” (p. 272). As Wood, Bruner, and Ross use this term in 1976, they draw from the original meaning of “scaffolding” (a temporary support while building) to create a metaphor of “scaffolding” to better explain how adults, or those with more expertise and experience, can “play in joint problem-
solving activities with children,” or those with less expertise and experience. They write that “scaffolding” is a:

process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal, which would be beyond his unassisted efforts. This scaffolding consists essentially of the adult “controlling” those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence. (from Thompson, 2009)

In response to a prompt, the candidate (as a novice) is responsible for crafting a “statement of purpose” that will demonstrate her/his ability to be a “successful” graduate student and that they “fit in” or are “compatible” with the program s/he is applying to.

While candidates to graduate programs will most likely have experience writing texts about her/himself, there are populations of candidates that do not share knowledge or experiences that will help her/him meet the tacit expectations of the prompt or understand the tacit meanings of the topics to be discussed. Thus, while candidates may be able to compose a text about themselves with little to no assistance, there are facets of this task that are beyond the capacity of some candidates. While much of the scholarship discussing “scaffolding” involves how it is used in the classroom, writing center, or with L2 education under domains of (for example) literacy, composition, science fields, mathematics (see Thompson, 2009; van de Pol, 2010), this concept has been used in scholarship discussing peer-to-peer scaffolding and writing/reading/cognition skills instruction (see O’Brien, 2005; Rosenshine and Meister, 1992; Smagorinsky, 1993; Wallace, 1994/2016). The concept of “scaffolding” can further be used in discussions of
prompts, because of the support that is necessary to understand the tacit knowledge in a prompt without accessibility to context or without the genre knowledge that would be useful in deconstructing the tacit assumptions and responding to the prompt.

Current scholarship describes “scaffolding” as an ongoing process between a novice and expert. In extending this definition to this study, this definition requires a little reworking. This study in large part analyzes “statement of purpose” prompts, which is an exchange in which the prompt designers might not anticipate how much knowledge a candidate has in advance to designing a prompt or have an ongoing interaction that “allows the tutor [or the prompt designer] to diagnose the student’s [or candidate’s] misunderstandings and make needed adjustments” in the strategies being used (Thompson, 2009). Prompt designers might come to conclusions about better strategies through longitudinally studying their own prompts and candidates’ responses. Taking this difference in situation into account, as it is operationalized in this study, “scaffolding” can be referred to as an effort by prompt designers to employ supportive strategies (such as providing explanation, examples, context, resources, etc.) when facets of the assigned task could be outside of the capacity of some candidate populations; these facets can include not having an understanding of nontransparent, tacit expectations and knowledge that a candidate would need access to in order to compose a response to the prompt that gives all candidates an uncompromised opportunity to demonstrate the assessed constructs.

University of California (Davis) makes an effort to provide scaffolding to candidates in their “statement of purpose” prompt. While they begin their prompt with a list of topics for candidates to address in their “statement of purpose,” such as “academic
preparation and motivation,” the prompt designers later provide some scaffolding as to what inherent meanings underlie this phrase in their prompt. The designers write:

preparation and motivation may include your academic and research experiences that prepare you for this graduate program (for example: coursework, employment, exhibitions, fieldwork, foreign language proficiency, independent study, internships, laboratory activities, presentations, publications, studio projects, teaching, and travel or study abroad) and motivation or passion for graduate study. (University of California (Davis), “Statement of Purpose”)

As shown by the designers of University of California (Davis)’s prompt, “academic preparation and motivation” could imply a variety of options candidates could choose to take up in response to this prompt, and inferring these possible choices might be outside of the capacity of some populations of candidates who do not have experiences that would lead them to these inferences. Rather than assuming that candidates will know what the admissions committee is most interested in knowing about candidates’ “academic preparation and motivation,” they provide a context-specific definition and possible examples of what these designers take to be understood by this phrase. In this move, the prompt designers controlling the parts of the tasks that could be outside of the capability of the candidate: inferring tacit knowledge and assumed expectations, thus providing candidates with a space to write about those topics that are most closely aligned with the interests of the committee members who will be reading these “statements of purpose.”

Like a temporary supportive structure used when building, scaffolding might be used by “statement of purpose” prompt designers to explain what is meant by a phrase in
order to be more explicit on what the admissions committee might be expecting, as in the example from University of California (Davis). By providing textual moments of scaffolding, a candidate can draw from the knowledge in the prompt to construct a “statement of purpose” that will respond to the prompt in ways that are more closely aligned to the expectations of the committee members. Prompt designers might also provide resources for a candidate to draw on in the composition of their response, such as a link to a program description. These examples of scaffolding are only a couple of many scaffolding choices prompt designers can make when designing a prompt for candidates.

In combination with the kind of training I received in my undergraduate program that did not provide me with resources that would have been helpful to the kind of strategic compositional work that I would need to accomplish in crafting a “statement of purpose,” the lack of scaffolding in the prompt I encountered affected my written product. And because of this complex mixture of previous training and lack of scaffolding in the writing prompt, I composed a “statement of purpose” that was formulaic and failed to do what I hoped it would. In analysis of my own response (See Appendix A for full text) of 499 words to this prompt, I see that I had used 50% of my words to introduce quotations (“Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood explain that…”), quote other texts (“…writing is viewed as a means of self-discovery. By exploring language as a mode of self-expression, students come to know themselves and to develop an ‘authentic voice’ in their writing”), and refer to these quotations (“As stated by Murphy and Sherwood, writing is vital tool students need to discover their own voice as they construct their ideas in classes and on into their future.”). The remaining words were split between a discussion of my personal intentions and objectives (38%) and discussing
my special interests (13%). I had further trouble deciphering what the difference was between these topics, because my “personal intentions” were my “special interests” and were the “objectives” I sought to accomplish.

While half of the words used in my “statement of purpose” revolved around the act of quoting, it was not executed in a way that would assist me, but rather it detracted from what I was seeking to accomplish in this text. In my second paragraph, I start with a statement that aims to show how my program would create a dynamic educational experience (via advice from a professor). I then go on to quote two different texts. The first one by Murphy and Sherwood comments that writing in classrooms is crucial as it can be used by students to encourage self-expression and discovery. With a lack of transition of how I intended to tie these two texts together besides with their discussed topics, I quoted a passage from Kim Addonizio’s creative writing exercise book, which also discusses self-discovery. And while I do extend the use of these quotations to attempt to say that writing in any genre can end in self-discovery, this discussion of self-discovery in writing does not easily explain the dynamic educational experience that I start the paragraph out with. It isn’t until later in the text that this discussion comes back in, and by then, it is too late to carry on this discussion further with the reader.

Furthermore, my overall desire to discuss how teaching writing takes creativity is lost, because of a rigidly enforced rule to use quotations from texts I’ve read.

My effort to quote and satisfy the suggestion from my professor provided less space for me to discuss my personal intentions and objectives and special interests (topics required by the prompt). Further, only one quotation used is from authors related to the field of Rhetoric and Composition (Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood), which I had
gained access to coursework relating to writing centers. However, I was unable to contextualize the quotation and give my readers an understanding of why I was using it. This failure to contextualize is seen as I move from the claim that “[c]omposition, pedagogy, and creative writing will create a wonderful dynamic in my educational experience” to my quotation from Murphy and Sherwood. I don’t give context for what their work (in which this quotation is extracted) is seeking to accomplish or write in a way that would help my reader to understand what I want them to do with this quotation. Instead, I quote them, give a summative sentence of their work and attempt to extend their work towards “the classroom,” and then move into quoting Kim Addonizio.

Overall, I struggled to effectively use the quotations for the purposes I had intended to. My Murphy and Sherwood quotation is stunted in an isolated discussion with my Addonizio quotation about self-discovery. Further, my description of my special interests and personal intentions and objectives only get to the surface. As I now have more words (or an increased and more nuanced vocabulary) for these interests, intentions, and objectives than I did when I originally wrote this text, I might have said that I want to be an instructor that creates spaces in which scholars can write with their readers in mind to make informed compositional choices, which I then would set up with a discussion of past instructors and UMaine’s program, but I never went further into this interest of mine. I didn’t say more about how UMaine can help me accomplish this objective, for example. Now, knowing more about the Rhetoric and Composition field than I did then, I can see that there was little work towards writing for instructors in this field, especially by failing to use a discourse or scholarship that would be more familiar to these instructors.
In the liminal space of graduating from undergraduate and applying for graduate school, I wrote a “statement of purpose” that held tensions of appeasing my current professors and writing to impress the “professors of … [my] field,” and I struggled to accomplish both of these tasks. While my lack of nuanced knowledge of the field, its discourse, and the unawareness that the professors in my future field were having very different conversations than those I studied with all played roles in the lackluster “statement of purpose” I composed, there are other aspects that should be considered. The space was limiting, the prompt was nonspecific and generic, and I struggled with demonstrating that I could be a scholar and instructor in a new community where these terms were talked about differently. Concealed from me, were the complex definitions (such as “voice,” “agency,” or “power” – all words I had used in my “statement of purpose”) between the activity system that I was leaving and the one I was seeking admission into. If I knew there were different ones that existed, where could I have found these different definitions?

While I was admitted into the English Department, I was not granted funding, and after struggling with the decision to study without funding, I ignored my professors’ warnings of “You should never go to graduate school if you aren’t funded.” After obtaining a graduate assistantship with the student records department with the aid of more familiar genres, like a “resume” and “cover letter”, I began my first semester as an English graduate student. However, about a month and a half into the semester, I was taken aside by the graduate coordinator and told that I had proven myself to be a “promising graduate student,” driven, and that a past collaborative project with a colleague had made its way to the Writing Center Director, who was impressed and
wanted to grant me a graduate assistantship under the English Department for assisting
him in Writing Center work.

When I was encouraged to reapply for a teaching assistantship for the following
year, I was prompted to reread my file and update any matriculation genres I felt needed
work. With permission, I collected my file and reviewed my texts. In the process, I
unfortunately read some unfavorable comments about me based on my application
genres, which noted that there was nothing special about my “statement of purpose,”
indicating it was as generic and unimpressive as I now realize it was. There was
something about that “statement of purpose” and the other application genres that failed
to show that I could be a “promising graduate student” or that I was driven, unlike my
scholarly performance or that previous collaborative project, which more effectively
demonstrated these characteristics.

Before studying in the Rhetoric and Composition field, I had felt that I wasn’t
able to be a “good” graduate student, that I wasn’t “smart enough.” However, now I have
a better understanding of rhetorical genre studies to help me understand my experiences;
I have scholarship that explains many of my experiences and raises questions about the
“statement of purpose” genre. For example, I now see these experiences as an earnest
effort towards boundary crossing (as mentioned in Reiff and Bawarshi’s study) when
encountering a new and unfamiliar genre, discussed later in this chapter. While studying
in my MA program in Rhetoric and Composition, I have been able to better understand
my experiences with scholarship, such as Swales’s (1996) work with the “occluded
genre.”
In Swales’s (1996) work, he studies the “submission letter” for publication submissions, an occluded genre (a genre that is hidden from sight and only known to those insiders). These newcomers, who are submitting their articles for publication for the first times, then face difficulties in “matching the expectations of their targeted audiences” (p. 46). He finds that texts written by NNE (Non-Native English) speakers and NE (Native English) speakers both tend to demonstrate compositional patterns, which might indicate their status as a newcomer or as a NNE speaker, which might cause readers to infer a lack of preparation on the part of the author. Swales’s findings reflect my own experiences with the “statement of purpose.” As a new genre, I composed a text that was generic, unimpressive, and demonstrated that I was unprepared for graduate level study, demonstrating that I was a newcomer who was not prepared.

While some candidates have an understanding of the tacit genre conventions, assumptions and expectations with the help from of their previous experiences, such as those in undergraduate, there are still populations of candidates who lack these experiences and a tacit knowledge that will assist her/him in crafting a “statement of purpose” that will be more successful in earning her/him a favorable decision. As a result, matching expectations of their targeted audiences can prove difficult. And while this speculation is based on my own experience, I can’t be the only candidate to have this experience. Rather, by what we know about genres in different communities, there are differences in meanings and expectations depending on the community the genre is situated in, thus indicating the possibility of candidates not having a tacit knowledge of these different meanings and expectations. And because I have had this fraught experience with the “statement of purpose” genre, it indicates that there might be facets
of the genre of a “statement of purpose” that affect some populations of candidates for graduate admission.

In order to more effectively understand the forces at work in this situation, the concept of activity systems may be useful in framing the work of this study. This theory is useful, because Activity Theory gives us a way to consider how “rules, customs, and histories” (and I might add “constructs”), all of which are often assumed aspects of graduate admissions, plays a role in how candidates compose in new genres for the evaluators in this activity system to aid in the accomplishment of matriculation decisions. And with this knowledge, we might be in a better position to understand and discuss how scaffolding can be useful in “statement of purpose” prompts.

In short, this theory proposes that all activity is social and is outcome- and objective-directed (Russell, 1997). In the commonly used activity system model (see Figure 1.1), there are the subject(s) of the activity system, the goals of the activity system, the community involved in accomplishing the goal(s), the rules, histories and customs that guide the behavior, choices, communication, etc., the ways that the labor is divided amongst members of the community, and the tools of the activity system. The tools are used by the subject and community to accomplish their goal(s), and the goals and histories and customs help the members of the activity system in deciding what tools to use. While every aspect of an activity system influences the other aspects, tools mediate the direction of the activity within the activity system.
Russell (1997) notes that genres are tools that help subjects of activity systems accomplish their objectives. In other words, genres are then examples of some of the tools that members of activity systems interact with when working towards accomplishing the objectives and outcomes. These genres can be determined by our goals and the histories, rules, and customs that influence what genres we think are available to us. While Russell provides a useful example of how the genre of the grocery list helps his family activity system accomplish some of their goals, an example placed in the context of graduate admissions might be useful in understanding how this theory will be useful to consider in this study.

Candidates for graduate admissions can be seen as the incoming “subject” of the graduate admissions activity system at a particular (or several different) institution(s). The graduate committee (as the community) has histories that are essential to the function of the activity system. The rules being operationalized might require committee members

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to only accept those candidates that match a particular construct (developed over time through multiple evaluations and conversations about candidates and graduate scholars) or that have particular qualities (such as experience with empirical research or having an interest in studying one of the literature focuses that can be provided by the available faculty). To evaluate whether candidates have these qualities or match their constructs of, for example, a “promising candidate,” some tools are crucial to making these decisions. Committee members might use multiple genres to evaluate the presence of these qualities of constructs, or they might receive this information from evaluation of one genre. For instance, if they require all matriculated scholars to have a specific GPA, an official transcript would be the only genre necessary to evaluate. However, for a construct like “has interest in empirical research,” a candidate’s “statement of purpose,” “writing sample,” and “letters of recommendation” might all provide information towards demonstrating whether such a quality or construct is present or met.

With their rules, histories, and customs, committee members might have an idea of what it means or what it might look like to be a “promising candidate” or a “good fit” with their program. These constructs might be sedimented from past cultural history and past experiences with mediational means. As noted by Russell (1995), “…all mediational means are cultural, with meanings arising from the history of their use” (p. 54). As these tools are used over time, meanings and knowledge emerge from the cultural history of their use and become tacitly understood for those who are insiders. For committee members, the histories of these genres influence what it means to be a “good fit” or to have a “successful statement of purpose,” but for newcomers (candidates for graduate admissions) who are attempting to interact with these new and unfamiliar genres, such as
a “statement of purpose” or a “writing sample,” they might not have a knowledge of expectations for these genres or what prompt designers mean by the vocabulary used in the provided prompts. And without this tacit knowledge of expectations or vocabulary that is held by insiders, a candidate might not construct a version of a “writing sample” or a “statement of purpose” that demonstrates their ability to be a “good fit” or “promising candidate,” even if s/he might be. Furthermore, graduate admissions committees might have varying constructs of what it means to be a “good fit,” a “promising candidate,” or as Iowa State University assesses, having the “ability to pursue graduate work in literature” (Iowa State University). A candidate might not know that the meanings of these contextually-based constructs they are attempting to demonstrate through their matriculation materials, that their definitions might be more nuanced and more complex than they appear in the “statement of purpose” prompt, and that these constructs are dependent on the activity system from which the prompt is provided.

As candidates move from their undergraduate program, a familiar activity system, to a new activity system, they carry with them the knowledge that is now tacit to her/him. Different from that knowledge, there is the possibility that the new activity system they are writing to seek admission into has contextual meanings and knowledge that are tacit to its insiders that are very different that those they had previously gained access to. And like me, candidates might not only be unaware of what this missing knowledge might be, but might further be unaware that there was tacit knowledge that they do not have. And in my response to the “statement of purpose” prompt, my lack of knowledge of the genre and this activity system affected the text I constructed. My experience might be further explained by McCarthy’s (1987/2014) longitudinal study of Dave, starting in freshman
year, as he moved from freshman composition to a poetry class, and finally into a biology course. Her study focused on Dave’s encounters with new, yet similar, genres that led Dave to feel like “a stranger in strange lands” (p. 232) as he moved from one activity system (freshman composition) with its own genres and specific conventions to another (a poetry classroom). From scholarship on activity systems, one might speculate that not always being able to have access to the tacit understandings of his poetry professor could have lead to writing that did not accurately reflect his writing abilities but rather reflected his difficulty of transferring genre knowledge from previously practiced freshman composition genres to the new poetry genres he was encountering in his new activity system.

Like Dave, candidates also experienced this transitioning into a new activity system with unfamiliar genres that require candidates to draw from and transfer previous genre knowledge. In this liminal space between graduating from one university and the unknown admission into another university, a candidate’s objective is to be accepted into a particular graduate program. And in order to gain acceptance into this new activity system, candidates need to not only use new genres but do so strategically to meet expectations of the admissions committee. As Bazerman notes, becoming part of a new activity system involves using genres that are new, and to become involved in a new activity system requires one to learn how to use new genres (Russell, 1997, p. 516; Engeström, 1987). These new genres are also high stakes; the results of a “promising” or “inadequate” application being either admission with funding, admission without funding, or rejection from the academic activity system. Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), drawing from Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993), note that “…For writers to make things
happen, that is, to publish, to exert an influence on the field, to be cited, and so forth, they must know how to strategically use their understanding of genre” (p. 78). Out of the six genres later explored in this study, this genre was one of a set of genres that can be used to make something (a favorable matriculation decision) happen, and in my case, my use of this genre did not work to demonstrate I merited the department’s funding.

At the time, I didn’t have enough experience with and knowledge of this genre, which left me struggling to use them strategically. As I hadn’t received feedback on my first “successful” “statement of purpose,” besides being accepted to my chosen program, I assumed my previous strategies had successfully accomplished the purpose of this genre. Like Swales’s research on the “submission letter,” the “statement of purpose” is an occluded genre of which there is no formal instruction for and which there is little shared knowledge on the conventions of this genre (Swales, 1996). So, lack of knowledge, practice, feedback, and experience resulted in an attempt to compose a genre that was still new and unfamiliar. As Swales notes about the “submission letter,” “…exemplars of these genres are hidden, ‘out of sight’ or ‘occluded’ from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality” (p. 46). Akin to the “submission letter,” authentic exemplars of the “statement of purpose” genre are occluded from the public as well, a point further supported by Swales in an interview about “personal statements” with Issues in Writing (Barton & Brown, 2004). Further, even if a database of exemplar “statements of purpose” were made available to the public to learn from, as this study will demonstrate, specificity to the program and university is a strategy that is favored amongst prompt designers.

Eaton (2009) discusses the specificity required and careful work expected of candidates for Technical Communication graduate programs. As she writes, the work that
goes into creating an application for graduate admissions can take two months minimum but she suggests “4 – 6 months” of preparation (p. 163). She provides guidance on selecting or crafting a writing sample and approaches to asking for “strong” letters of recommendation, but her information about “Personal Statements” is of most interest to this study, noting first the purposes of this genre as they are seen in Technical Communications:

- To show that you are a serious applicant
- To show why you like that specific program
- To that you can write and think well
- To explain any problems in an application (low test scores, lack of experience, poor GPA) (p. 164).

In discussion of these purposes, she provides some guidance on how candidates might work demonstrate how (for example) s/he is a “serious applicant” or to demonstrate that s/he has an investment in the field and scholarship. Further demonstrating that the requirements of this genre (and other matriculation genres) have specific expectations that may be occluded and need to be provided to candidates, and as one of Eaton’s respondents notes, “…it’s not possible to give advice on applying to Master’s programs because they differ across the country). There isn’t one absolute answer, so follow the advice that makes sense to you” (p. 151), further indicating disagreement and points of contention depending on the context the genres for graduate matriculation would be situated within.

And while there are some overarching conventions to this genre, different graduate admissions committees might assume that their tacitly understood knowledge is
accessible to candidates, and exemplars with commentary that are not specific to a university, or program even, will not assist a candidate in anticipating the tacit knowledge and expectations that will be necessary in crafting a statement of purpose that will demonstrate her/his “promise” as a candidate for graduate studies at a specific university for a specific field of study. With a lack of knowledge and a way to learn from exemplar “statements of purpose” (those that had been accepted and rejected from the university or one with similar constructs of what it means to be a qualified or “promising” candidate) that will help candidates navigate the rhetorical demands, candidates can be in a position in which they are unsure of what is expected. As demonstrated through Eaton (2009), the purposes behind crafting a “personal statement” would be unknown would it not be for resources similar to that she provides in her article.

This inexperience and lack of tacit knowledge and resources can further explain why (for example) in my more practiced knowledge of familiar genres like a “resume” and “cover letter” allowed me to put myself in a better position to get a graduate assistantship with other departments after being matriculated. Equipped with more experiences with these genres, I had a more developed understanding of the generic conventions of a “resume,” which might be considered tacitly understood by me. I also had the knowledge of where to find some guiding commentary on exemplars online for administrative positions, and the provided job description with a list of requirements to fill the position that I could use to strategically craft a cover letter to demonstrate that my skills would transfer to the position and that I could accomplish the tasks required of me. I used these mediating materials to craft a “resume” and “cover letter” that demonstrated that I was a “good fit” for the position I applied for. In contrast to this experience with
“resume” and “cover letter” genres, my limited knowledge of the “statement of purpose” conventions led me to seek others (i.e. professors, colleagues, online help pages) to share their knowledge with me, which led to some conflicting rhetorical demands that I needed to navigate while composing.

In my own composition of the “statement of purpose,” described earlier, I was operating by a rule, or rhetorical demand, provided by my colleague to “just answer all the questions they ask in the prompt.” There was a demand provided by my professor to add quotations, and there were the rhetorical demands of the prompt:

1. Limit essay to 300-500 words
2. Write about your academic and personal intentions and objectives
3. Write about any special interest
4. (If transferring to Maine) explain why you wish to transfer

There were also my own rhetorical demands that I was operating with as I composed, some coming from my educational background (e.g. don’t be repetitive, use strategies that reflect pathos, ethos, and logos) and others reflecting what I assumed about this genre based on my past experiences with similar genres (e.g. talk about my relevant experiences, highlight how the degree/program will be beneficial to me).

To better understand the influence of these conflicting demands, Devitt’s (2004) *Writing Genres* might provide some context for this experience with a new and unfamiliar genre. Devitt provides readers with an overview of genre theory, and while reluctant to reduce this scholarship (which is very complex), she provides a foundation from which to better understand genre scholarship. In her synthesis, she describes genre, rather than as a response to a recurring situation, as a “nexus between an individual’s
actions and a socially defined context” (p. 31). Genre is dynamic in that it reciprocally constructs and is constructed by the contexts (cultural, generic, and situational) and the actions of an individual. These influential contexts are defined by Devitt; contexts of situations are the “people, languages, and purposes involved in every action,” contexts of culture “influences how the situation is constructed and how it is seen as recurring in genres” and are the “ideological and material baggage surrounding our every action,” and contexts of genre are the “existing genres we have read or written or that others say we should read or write” (p. 25-6). It is through the actions of the candidate, the prompt designers, and the graduate admissions committee as prompts are designed, responded to in construction of a “statement of purpose,” and used to make matriculation decisions that has shaped this genre to be what it is, along with the contexts surrounding the engagement with this genre. As Devitt’s discussion of genre demonstrates, genre is complex and “requires multiplicity” (p. 33), noting that genre requires the involvement of many individuals enacting many recurring actions.

As in my own experience, candidates who experience conflicting rhetorical demands will need to choose which demands to follow or attempt to follow them all with the cost of producing an essay that reflects a lack of focus, feels scattered, and potentially reflects that the candidate is “unprepared.” While I was encouraged by a professor to demonstrate my ability to use conventions of scholarly prose (e.g. quoting and analysis), I was also required to write solely about my objectives and special interests. Further, I was limited to using 300-500 words, and these rhetorical demands seemed to conflict, because I knew that quoting was a task that required care in selection, building the audience up to understanding why I was using a particular quotation, introducing the contextual
information for this quotation, quoting the text, was taught to reiterate the quotation, and then provide some analysis. There were also clues from popular culture that informed me that being “narrative” or “personal” was permitted and even encouraged, yet my professor and online help pages informed me otherwise. There were even context-specific expectations that I didn’t have a understanding of, which further led to me creating a “statement of purpose” that didn’t meet the expectations of the professors of my field.

To know the genre, as described by Devitt (2004), “means knowing such rhetorical aspects as appropriate subject matter, level of detail, tone, and approach as well as the expected layout and organization (p. 16); an unfamiliar, new genre like the “statement of purpose” can result in some populations of candidates not having access to this knowledge. The prompt provides some information, which can be ambiguous, about the subject matter that should be taken on in the candidate’s response. And without information scaffolding the candidate on how to proceed, candidates might transfer knowledge from past experiences with similar genres to transfer to the task of writing in this new genre. This knowledge is supported by Devitt (2004) who writes that the “existence of prior known genres shapes the development of new or newly learned genres” (p. 28). In Reiff and Bawarshi’s study, they explore the tendencies of students upon encountering new, unfamiliar genres.
Contrary to what might be expected, Reiff and Bawarshi find that less confidence is a key factor in indicating whether the candidate will cross boundaries or, in the case of high confidence, guard boundaries. Furthermore, they find that:

[t]his confidence in defining the key tasks of the prompt, however, began to wane by the time students neared the more complex major paper, a more high-stakes assignment that marks the culmination of a sequence of inquiry-driven shorter papers and emerges out of a greater sense of classroom community, has a clearer purpose in the classroom context, and specifies a clearer sense of audience. (p. 325-6)

This finding can explain the experience that many writers face when being asked to write in a high-stakes, occluded genre, like the “statement of purpose.” There can be less confidence in boundary crossers’ own abilities to understand the prompt directions (if there is a prompt), and as a result, these writers become more aware of the need to reinvent and reimagine their strategies.

As candidates compose a “statement of purpose,” this situation is likely to affect their composition of this genre. The “statement of purpose” is a high-stakes, occluded genre, and thus, candidates’ confidence in interpreting the directions of the available prompt might waver, leading to an attempt to apply prior genre knowledge to this unfamiliar genre, either leading to boundary crossing (a successful abstraction of genre knowledge to the new genre) or boundary guarding (an unsuccessful transfer of genre knowledge, often resulting from drawing from whole genres and limited strategies).

In my exploration of this genre and matriculation genres in this study, I imagined that the research areas of writing studies, in particular rhetorical genre studies or writing
assessment, might have begun some work with graduate admissions. With writing
assessment scholars interested in high-stakes and standardized assessment, graduate
admissions seems like a site of study that would add to the growing scholarship in this
research area. Graduate admissions, a high-stakes decision based on a collection of high-
stakes genres (some of which are standardized – e.g. GRE General Test, Subject Test in
English, TOFEL) might then prove to be a very useful for this area of research. Brown’s
(2004) study of the successful and unsuccessful “personal statements” in a psychology
department is an example of the only scholarship I found that pertained to graduate
admissions genres (the other article being Eaton, 2009). Brown studies a particular
psychology department, in which only 5 candidates were matriculated out of 200
candidates during the academic year of 2002 (p. 246). He finds that rather than discussing
candidates’ lives outside of academic (content suggested by the generic title), successful
candidates discussed their “identities as apprentice scientists” (p. 259). And this
preference prompts Brown’s suggestion to reconsider this genre name and suggests
“prospective statement.” Brown’s (2004) study provides valuable insight into my own
study of “statements of purpose” and the inclusion of the personal, which seems to be a
point of contention.

While Brown’s study of “personal statements” is one of the only articles I found
on graduate admissions genres, there are also some writing studies researchers that can
contribute to the framework of my study. Elliot’s On a Scale (2005) provides a socio-
historical overview of writing assessment, and can provide some context for the history
that influences ideas about constructs and writing assessment. In his text, he writes about
the struggle of writing assessment scholars in the search to evaluate “intelligence,” a
construct that assessment designers worked to measure in entrance examinations. With a purpose to measure “intelligence” as a construct, or more specifically, measure and identify those examinees who are “competent” to withstand university-level education and those who are “incompetent,” Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University from 1869-1907, implements entrance examinations in English composition for the first time in 1873-1874 in addition to their traditional Latin, Greek, and mathematics examinations (Elliot, p. 10). And the results of this initial English composition exam shocked faculty.

More than half of the students that took the test, coming from the best prep schools and academies, failed the test due to what was referred to as “errors” that “deformed” the assessment books with “grossly ungrammatical or profoundly obscure sentences, and some by absolute illiteracy” (Elliot, p.12; Connors, 1997). These “errors” that were so offensive to the reader/evaluator (there was only one) can be defined as those of “[p]unctuation, capitalization, spelling, [and] syntax” (Connors, p. 686). Eliot comments on the purpose of this examination in his inaugural address stating that this “rigorous examination for admission has one good effect throughout the college course: it prevents a waste of instruction upon incompetent persons” (Elliot, p.10), these assessments working to separate those “incompetent” candidates from “competent” candidates. These examinations began a long tradition of writing assessment, which has evolved over time with new technologies (i.e. objective tests, holistic scoring and rubrics), and as new tests were created, the search for a reliable, or consistent, examination that measured “intelligence” continued.

In many of these assessments, “verbal ability” became a proxy measure for “intelligence,” and test designers experimented with ways to make a more reliable test
that would separate those candidates who were “capable,” “proficient,” and “literate” out of the pool of potential candidates. Candidates belonging to protected classes, like racial minorities or those coming from families of low socio-economic status, were considered to be mentally inferior and were refused education or, as seen during World War I, were recruited into labor battalions or ranked lowly (Elliot, p. 66). Another example of how these populations were negatively treated based on testing results can be seen during the 1950’s; with a need for recruits for military service, the Selective Service College Qualifying Test was created and administered to segregate those who were educated for deferment from the pool of potential recruits who would be drafted into war (Elliot, p. 132).

Reliability was the focus of writing assessment, as early writing assessment researchers looked to design a text that would reliably (and thus fairly) assess “intelligence,” and Huot (2002) notes that this translation of “reliability” to “fairness” “is not only inaccurate but dangerous, because it equates the statistical consistency of the judgments being made with their value” (p. 87-8). With such a heavy focus and experimentation towards solving reliability issues in assessment, especially inter-rater reliability, it isn’t until 1937 that discussions of validity become of interest in writing assessment scholarship, and later the notion of validity becomes more complex in 1954 (Elliot, 2005). With this new concept of validity, the inquiries based on assessment begin to move away from conversations such as how we can get an assessment to give us the same results across multiple administrations to questions of how does a particular assessment measure a particular construct, such as “intelligence,” what might be meant
by “intelligence,” and further, does measuring “verbal ability” assist us in making judgments on one’s “intelligence.”

Validity gets defined a couple different ways, illustrating how new and evolving this concept is. However as mentioned by Elliot, validity is defined in 1999 as “the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by proposed uses of tests” (p. 268). In regards to validity, this text is primarily interested with questions of construct validity, which is defined by Guion (1980) in Huot’s (Re)Articulating Writing Assessment (2002) as “the construct of the ability, skill, or performance being measured,” in graduate admission assessment (p. 48). Murphy and Yancey (2008) also define construct validity using Williamson’s 1993 definition: “…it examines the extent to which an assessment tool conforms to a theory of writing” (p. 366). A test of construct validity is not really in the scope of this study, especially without samples from each university of matriculated and denied candidates’ admission files or more documents on the constructs being assessed. However, a discussion of constructs will be useful for later discussions, and while I do not have access to all graduate admissions committees’ assessed constructs, some of their prompts point us to some constructs being assessed, such as being a “promising candidate,” “preparation for rigorous study,” or a “good fit.”

Some examples of constructs being evaluated in graduate matriculation decisions extracted from “statement of purpose” prompts include the “ability to succeed in graduate-level work” or “ability to pursue graduate work in literature” (University of Massachusetts – Boston; Iowa State University), one’s “potential as a professional, and as a human being,” and “professional self-presentation” (University of Massachusetts –
Amherst; University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus). George Mason University looks to assess (for example) a candidate’s “understanding of the character and demands of the MA concentration,” which can be assessed through the ways in which candidates discuss the program and what evidence s/he provides of their ability to meet the demands of the program. In comparison, for candidates applying to UMass – Amherst, a candidate will be asked to discuss her/his, “potential as a professional and as a human being,” as is purported to be assessed by UMass – Amherst’s “statement of purpose” prompt, which seems to be a construct that is more difficult to measure; UMass – Amherst graduate admissions (GA) committee members would need to have theoretical definitions for what it might look like to have “potential” as a “professional” and how it might differ from having “potential” as a “human being” in order to assess these constructs.

In addition, measuring one’s “promise” as a candidate or “ability to succeed in graduate-level work” might prove to be a daunting task. However, these are some of the constructs being purported to candidates as being measured. While candidates for graduate matriculation assessments are voluntarily applying for graduate programs, there are still ethical concerns that are tied to issues of validity. As one instance, what constitutes a “promising” candidate to one university might be very different from another university, and without an understanding of what a particular university understands to be signs of a “promising” candidate, a candidate might not know (1) if they are “promising” by the standards/definitions of the particular institution, (2) how to present themselves in their “statement of purpose” to demonstrate their “promise,” or (3) that “promising” might look differently amongst institutions, and without the scaffolding to understand the necessary knowledge s/he lacks, these context-specific definitions
might be missed by candidates. As a result of these missed context-specific definitions, s/he might not craft a “statement of purpose” that demonstrates the kind of “potential” or “promise” s/he might really possess or the ability to be “compatible” to the particular programs s/he is applying to.

Relating to conversations of assessed constructs, composition studies scholars have also provided us with scholarship on the standardization of language, Giltrow (one such scholar) frames the myth of the “center” in her (2003) study. She discusses Milroy and Milroy (1985/1991) who claim that standardization “is a requisite for modern systems, assuring clarity of communication across time and space” (p. 365). As demonstrated through the work of Connors (1997) and Elliot’s (2005) historical accounts of assessment, this notion that a standard of language is crucial and that all other variations need to be removed from tainting English played a role in writing assessment with the assessment of constructs (in particular the attempted assessment of “intelligence”). Giltrow’s claim that standardization of languages, is not only advanced by dictionaries and grammars but is also moved forward “by institutions, roles, disciplines, techniques, policies, publicity” (p. 364) is supported by Elliot (2005) and Connors’s (1997) examples of how this idea of a standard language privileged some populations over others. Williams (1981/2009) further complicates this idea of a standard language as he points the reader to many examples of “errors” that appear in style guides.

Of his many examples, he provides an excerpt from E.B. White, which violates his own rule of faulty parallelism, to which Williams writes that he is not interested in the fact that he violated his rule, but rather is interested in:
the fact that no one, E. B. White least of all, seemed to notice that E. B. White had made an error. What I’m [ he’s] interested in here is the noticing or the not noticing by the same person who stipulates what should be noticed, and why anyone would surely have noticed if White had written,

I knows me and him will often revisit it,…(Williams, 1981/2009, p. 418)

As demonstrated here, if “errors” that are considered “offensive” or “oafish” and are also committed by the rule writers themselves, then it is our reading practices that we bring to texts that needs reexamination. This discussion of “errors” and privilege demonstrates that readers privilege some authors (considered “experts”) by reading the text with an intent to make meaning and thus do not find “errors.”

He further illustrates this point by ending his article with a discussion that there are 100 purposeful “errors” located throughout his text and he encourages readers to send in what “errors” they found on their first reading, demonstrating the respect we attribute to texts written by authors like Williams as readers read these texts with an intent to make meaning rather than to evaluate or mark up the text for “errors.” This article and experiment additionally demonstrates that the standardization of English does not truly exist, but that “error” seems to depend on how much authority or privilege is granted to the writer.

This notion of a standardized language further affects writing assessment. In Dryer’s (2013) study on the assessment of “writing ability” as a construct through his analysis of rubrics and grading definitions from first-year writing programs in the US, he observes that there has been progress motivated by current research and writing specialists but that there are still areas that require revisions in how we define the
construct of “writing ability” and how we discuss an assessment of this construct. Of the ways that the construct of “writing ability” has progressed, he writes that the construct of “error,” as is described in the rubrics and grading definitions he analyzes, has evolved to reflect current scholarship and thoughts on “error” through the recognition that “errors” are inevitable and that “there are kinds and degrees of error” (p. 26). While this progress is crucial in rumination of current scholarship, Dryer (2013) brings up some opportunities for revision. There is a lack of emphasizing the “situatedness of the students’ writing…, the local nature of the scoring and grading…, and the specific construct of the writing valued by the assessment…” (p. 27-8, original emphasis). The need for these kinds of revisions demonstrates the current need to recognize that “writing ability” is not a wide-sweeping construct, but that its assessment depends on the situation, the purpose, the genre.

In McCarthey’s (2008) study on No Child Left Behind (NCLB), she finds that there are negative effects of this assessment especially for low-income students and instructors, also noting that NCLB’s focus on reading and mathematics altered the curriculum being taught to students. Rather than a diverse curriculum, test preparation became the focus of class time and the “elimination of some subjects such as social studies or features of the school day (i.e., recess), and loss of creativity in their instruction” (p. 480). While teachers from high-income schools passed their annual yearly progress (AYP) and felt more freedom to spend class time on teaching writing, teachers from low-income schools (whose primary objective was to pass their AYP) did not feel this freedom, needing to teach and prepare students for what they would encounter on the test (p. 498) Thus while writing instruction
did not occur in the studied low-income schools, McCarthey (2008) did recognize that students were required to practice extended writing responses for their preparation for the reading portion of NCLB test. These findings demonstrate that while students are at least writing, they are only practicing the “writing abilities” that are limited to one genre they will only encounter in very scarce situations (e.g. standardized testing situations), which can greatly affect these students’ ability to demonstrate their “writing abilities” in various contexts and genres, such as placement essays following undergraduate matriculation (Aull, 2015) or in crafting a “statements of purpose.”

Deane (2013), also adding to the discussion of assessed constructs, studies the kind of construct being assessed through the highly disputed tool of automated essay scoring (AES). He finds that in the conversation swirling around this topic that there are some fundamental issues that have been raised. Deane (2013) writes that there are objections around how AES might affect the testing situation in which knowledge of machine scoring might “undermine the intended construct” (p. 15). There are also objections about scoring focused on technical inadequacies and what kind of construct is being measured by this scoring method, as AES “cannot interpret meaning, infer communicative intent, evaluate factual correctness and quality of argumentation, or take the writing process into account” (p. 15), indicating that while AES might be able to rate based on the qualitative aspects of a text, there is a far more complex work required of readers and raters is still not able to be accomplished by AES.
To demonstrate what kind of complex work is required in such critical roles as language user, reader, responder, evaluator, and gatekeeper, scholars like Lu (2004), Pennycook (2008), and Royster (1996) provide us with scholarship that considers these roles’ complex responsibilities and ways to carry out these responsibilities responsibly and responsively. Johnson and VanBrackle (2012) illustrate the consequences that emerge through entrenched notions of language standardizations and stigma or “internalized derision” for particular language features (p. 46). They conclude that raters of the Regent’s Writing Exam linguistically discriminated against “errors” that are typical of African American English (AAE) users over “errors” typical of Standard American English (SAE) users and English as a Second Language (ESL) users. Even though each essay only had eight “errors,” those typical of AAE were consistently failed more frequently than those with SAE “errors” or ESL “errors.” Williams (1981/2009) might add here that this evaluative difference might be because of (1) the readers’ searching for error and (2) the entrenched contempt towards “errors” like those of AAE. Johnson and VanBrackle’s (2012) findings confirm that “stigmatized varieties of a language suffer in formal educational settings” (p. 46). And these findings point to the entrenched construct of “error” that can still affect a reading.

Hull et al. (2009) further illustrate this notion of “error” affecting judgments made on a writer (or student) in their study of a classroom’s discourse. While common social practice in classroom engagement might follow the IRE sequence (Teacher Initiation → Response from Student(s) → and Evaluation of the Response), one of the instructor’s students, Maria (a student from a marginalized background and Non-Native English Speaker), does not follow this sequence, and Maria’s contributions are seen as “errors”
by June (the instructor). And although Maria has proven to be a brilliant student through her assignments, June perceives her negatively because she “errs” based on the tacit rules of the classroom. Like Maria, the students with AAE “errors” in Johnson and VanBrackle’s (2012) study, are perceived to “err” more egregiously, possibly because of the violation of tacit assumptions, the intent to find “error” over negotiating meaning, and the perceived egregiousness of the kind of difference in communication Maria and these writers demonstrate.

With Pennycook’s (2008) argument that English is a “language always in translation” (p. 34), we might consider our language work as requiring us to do more complex work than we might think of when we are to listen, read, evaluate, or respond. Lu (2004) writes of this complex work, labeling this work as jiaoing. She illustrates this concept by using an example of a what is considered “linguistic imperfection” caused by translation, or an “error,” she demonstrates how to think about this “error” as a discursive practice, requiring us to “delay our sound bites and lessons until we have examined the social, cultural, economic, as well as linguistic realities…” (p. 22). Both Lu (2004) and Royster (1996) point out that being a responsible and responsive user of language requires more than just talking and talking back (Royster, 1996, p. 38); both scholars emphasize what it might look like to “listen,” communicate, or jiao. This might look like treating all discursive acts as “matters of design” (Lu, 2004, p. 26), assuming author intentionality, and listening or reading with an intent to cooperate, “exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning, and create understanding” (Royster, 1996, p. 38).

While human evaluators are still required for this complex work, there are still concerns over reader bias. This worry can be illustrated by Tardy and Matsuda’s (2009)
study of identity construction through authorial voice by editorial board members during blind reviews. In their study, they find that editorial board members construct with 83% of their respondents reporting that they had formed a sense of the author identity during their time reviewing articles for publications. Several respondents made notes that while it is not their goal or intention to identify the author, their speculation is “triggered by anomalies in the text” (p. 45), and as noted by Tardy and Matsuda (2009) the reviewers’ goal as a gatekeeper (to determine whether texts are suitable for publication “for a specific forum within a specific disciplinary community”) (p. 45), might influence the reviewers’ attention to anomalies or deviations from genre or cultural norm.

In response to their findings, they infer that the construction of identity by readers acting as evaluators or gatekeepers “certainly does have the potential to serve as a mechanism for cultural reproduction, with readers favoring texts and writers who uphold established disciplinary norms” (p. 46). These findings point to possible complications in graduate admissions evaluations; with remnants of outdated “error” constructs (that have been demonstrated through scholars like Williams (1981/2009)) possibly still circulating, evaluators and gatekeepers might be bringing these constructs to their readings of texts. Furthermore, while Dryer (2013) observes that these constructs of “error” and “writing ability” have progressed in FYC exit examinations, the lack of studies on assessed constructs at the graduate level indicates the possible existence of outdated constructs of “error” and “writing ability” in these realms. My study hopes to spark this conversation, and as mentioned earlier, while an assessment of constructs is not within the parameters of this study of graduate matriculation genres, I do consider constructs in my analysis “statement of purpose” writing prompts and how scaffolding can be beneficial towards
making tacit expectations and knowledge more transparent and accessible to all populations of candidates in an effort to provide opportunities for all candidates to demonstrate their ability to meet the assessed constructs.

Early ideas of scaffolding come from Vygotsky’s (1978) notion that a student’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the distance between what a student can do by her/himself and what s/he can do with help/guidance. Thus, ZPD encourages educators to be aware of whether a student might need help in order to learn something, which is the broad notion of “scaffolding.” However, this notion has evolved and can be “extended to consider the ways that peers prompt each other dialogically to help them negotiate their way through unknown waters” (Bazerman, 1997, p. 305). This idea of scaffolding can be further applied to discuss how materials or resources might be used to provide necessary context that can create a space in which students can make their own informed, creative, or compositional decisions. As defined earlier, “scaffolding” is operationalized in this study as an effort by prompt designers to employ supportive strategies (such as providing explanation, examples, context, resources, etc.) when facets of the assigned task could be outside of the capacity of some candidate populations; these facets can include not having an understanding of nontransparent, tacit expectations and knowledge that a candidate would need access to in order to compose a response to the prompt that gives all candidates an uncompromised opportunity to demonstrate the assessed constructs.

Thus, while a candidate might need to demonstrate their understanding of the program’s demands (as in George Mason University’s prompt), providing links to resources about the program’s demands is an example of scaffolding that functions to provide knowledge that the candidate will need in order to respond to this prompt. In
their study of high stakes writing assessments, Beck and Jeffery (2007) refer to their findings on the verbs used in writing prompts to students. They find that “discuss” and “explain,” two common verbs used in the exams they analyzed, are ambiguous in what they expect examinees to accomplish, especially as the verbs conflict and thus are not indicative of the genre-based expectations (p. 69-70), which raises validity concerns. Beck and Jeffery (2007) observe an alarming disconnect “between what candidates are asked to produce and what they are rewarded for producing” (p. 75), thus leading to confusion regarding what the test designers hope their prompts are assessing, which might point to further confusions in writing assessment in regards to constructs of writing being assessed and the tacit expectations that are not accessible, and these possible threats to the validity of an exam are also relevant in graduate admissions assessment. Thus, one possible scaffolding choice that prompt designers can implement would be to provide the candidates with resources to draw from in response to the “statement of purpose” prompt, and this provision of resources allows prompt designers to be transparent to candidates about their expectations.

While the field of writing studies includes scholarship on entrance and exit examinations for FYC (First-Year Composition), genre transference, and studies of genres in the context of their activity systems (which inform this study in its methods and literature review), there is seems to be a lack of research completed in graduate admissions. With the exception of Brown’s (2004) study of Personal Statements in a Psychology graduate admissions environment and Eaton’s (2009) text on approaches to applying to graduate studies in Technical Communication programs, the scholarship completed in graduate admissions includes researchers in the fields of science,
psychology, and practicum-based programs (Colarelli et al. 2012; Foley and Hijazi (2013); Dawes (1971); Katz et al. (2009); Walfish and Moreia (2005); Karazsia and McMurtry (2012)). Most of these authors take an exploratory approach to learning about their field’s matriculation process through their analyses of GRE, interviews, faculty matriculation decisions or compare decisions amongst all of their required materials. Overall, this scholarship seeks to better understand the matriculation decisions that faculty members make and the best way to make this decision. One such team of researchers, Katz et al. (2009), explores the use of GRE scores in deciding candidates for graduate school admission to their nursing program, raising the concern that this criterion might become a barrier to potential candidates. While this study can only speak to the hindrance of the GRE in nursing, their findings are still useful in understanding the potential hindrance of such a high-stakes standardized test. They not only find that the GRE fails to accurately and significantly predict GPA of nursing candidates but that the GRE also acts as a financial and time barrier for many promising candidates to their program, prompting their readers to consider the benefits and drawbacks to this commonly used examination, indicating that the GRE can pose a potential financial barrier to many “promising” candidates.

In their exploration of the best possible way to make matriculation decisions, Walfish and Moreira (2005) provide a study that looks at the weightings of required materials in marriage and family therapy graduate programs. Through a factor analysis study, directors of the training programs in marriage and family therapy (MFT) ranked criteria on “importance by percentages” to their matriculation decisions (p. 397). They find that the most “important” materials are interview performance, a GPA over 3.2, and
a “personal statement” (“statement of purpose”). This study provides information that parallels the work done in my own study. While I do not look at the weightings of criteria in English graduate programs, I do look at those materials that are most commonly required, of which a “statement of purpose” is one of five most commonly requested materials. A question this study raises for graduate admissions scholarship is if the “statement of purpose” genre is weighted with as much importance as it is in marriage and family therapy graduate programs. Their study adds to the question of what genres are most important in making matriculation decisions for the admissions committee members who are making these decisions.

To add to this knowledge of genre weightings, Karazsia and McMurtry (2012) study the expectations of graduate matriculation decisions in their field of pediatric psychology. Specifically, their empirical purpose is to better understand the expectations of admissions committee faculty in pediatric psychology. The authors note that research methods and system evaluations is the most important criteria for candidates into their program, indicating that other criteria (such as GPA and GRE), while important, are not as crucial as a candidate’s ability to be a researcher. Their study points to an interesting question that bears on this study in particular, inquiring what expectations graduate admissions committee members bring with them to making decisions. What are those tacit expectations underlying admissions decisions?

We can understand from these studies that there are tensions and assumptions that have come into question in graduate level of these practicum-based programs, as shown by the research taking place in these fields. The existence of this scholarship indicates that there might then be similar tensions and assumptions in other fields of graduate
admissions, such as English. We learn that some populations of candidates might face barriers to graduate admissions (Katz et al., 2009), leading to these candidates delaying their application or not applying at all. Walfish and Moreira (2005) teach us that there is an assumed importance underlying matriculation genres that might be invisible to candidates as they prepare their application and might not be acknowledged by admissions committee members as they prepare to evaluate these applications. This assumed importance might hinder applications as they might not give those genres with the most weight adequate attention, and admission committee members might have differing views on weightings.

As evidenced by Karazsia and McMurtry (2012), expectations are also assumed in graduate admissions. While these studies exist in fields like nursing and psychology, the field of Rhetoric and Composition lacks scholarship on the expectations graduate admissions committees have for candidates of graduate studies, the matriculation criteria, and weight of criteria. A gap even in this scholarship is the study of the “statement of purpose.” Walfish and Moreira (2005) reference this genre in their study, indicating that it is a genre evaluated with more weight than other genres in family and marriage therapy graduate programs. However, no studies explore this genre to study its conventions or the kinds of writing this genre promotes. Thus, this study hopes to spark this conversation and scholarship in this research area. While my study seeks to understand the genres of importance to an activity system of English graduate admissions, with specific interest in one particular genre (the “statement of purpose”), the current scholarship on graduate matriculation is focused on those individuals making the matriculation decisions. However, researchers will benefit from empirical research on the genres (the mediational
means) being used as proxy measures for qualities that are difficult to measure. These genres that we believe are available to us in making these decisions can be recalculated to consider how these genres might be useful for candidates and the graduate committee members making matriculation decisions.

In an effort to begin a conversation about graduate matriculation examinations, I begin my study with the following questions:

(1) what genres are most commonly asked for in matriculation assessment examinations?

(2) what kinds of writing does the “statement of purpose” genre promote?

(3) what are the hidden or occluded tensions that might then hinder student performance with the “statement of purpose?”

In response to these questions, I first look at what genres are required by candidates as they apply for graduate study in English. I then move into coding and analysis of “statement of purpose” prompts, as I sought to understand what kinds of writing candidates were being asked to generate. And I finally investigate the tension of the inclusion of the “personal” in a “statement of purpose.” The “statement of purpose” is a site of research that seemed not only most accessible and unexplored, but was a site that could answer some of the questions that seemed to emerge in my fraught experience with this genre.
CHAPTER 2

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Materials

Data Collection

To address my research question on the current canon of matriculation examination, I revisited a list generated for a researched proposal of graduate exit examinations by an ad hoc committee. The list was generated “by setting the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education filters for ‘public’ and ‘DRU,’ ‘RU/H’ or ‘RU/VH,’ yielding an initial study population of 146 public research institutions with postgraduate education facilities” (UMaine Graduate English Comprehensive Exam Ad Hoc Committee, “Proposal for an Alternative to the Current English MA Comprehensive Exam Format,” Version 12/06/15). These criteria would filter those universities that are similar to the University of Maine (the only English graduate program of which I was personally familiar) a public university with high research activity.

My choice for only including those institutions with a terminal MA English program allows me to eliminate institutions, who use an MA English program as an “onramp” for the institution’s degree program from my study, allowing me to avoid data that comes from MA programs whose main purpose is to prepare scholars for their own institution’s doctoral program. By having a non-terminal MA program, their structure of the program would alter and differ from the other data I was collecting. These limitations left me with 122 universities as a study population. These criteria also made this research manageable for a MA thesis and leaves plenty of space for further research to be completed. Furthermore, it was important that my study reflect the point of view of the
candidate. Because of their undergraduate degrees, candidates for graduate study are usually only applying to graduate programs in the same field (i.e. English). By only studying the matriculation genres in English departments, I might more accurately be able to study the genres that candidates for graduate study in English might be required to submit.

**Texts Collected**

Throughout my data collection, I went to each website to collect the admission requirements for graduate students in the institutions’ English programs, and all data that was collected was for the academic year of 2015. As demonstrated in Figure 2.1, the data was collected as checks in an evolving checklist. Going through the list of institutions, various genres emerged and were added to the database. Some of the genres are anomalies (only being required of a small selection of institutions). As seen in the sampling in Figure 2.1, proof of residency (“Resident Application Status”) or “GRE Subject” Examination in English are required by very few institutions compared to those universities who require a “Statement of Purpose.”

From this data, the genres that were most frequently required were further analyzed. While a “statement of purpose” was one of the most commonly requested genres in matriculation examinations, it is further interesting as candidates produce a “statement of purpose” specifically for the institution and their application for admission. Whereas, other submitted matriculation texts are often facsimiles of texts from other activity systems, created for a contextual purpose and audience unknown to the admissions committee. Out of these genres, prompts for “statements of purpose,” appeared to be the genre that would work towards helping me answer my research
questions. This genre, the “statement of purpose” prompt, reflects critical attributes valued by institutions, and in many cases, those valued by the graduate programs under the English Department, as the designers of these texts are often from the English department. Figure 2.1 shows how the prompts were organized in this spreadsheet. A separate sheet was created in the database and the prompts were collected with their respective institutions, enabling more efficient coding with all prompts located in one easily accessible location.

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of Genre Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Name</th>
<th>GRE Subject</th>
<th>Statement of Purpose</th>
<th>Resident Application Stat</th>
<th>3 Letters of Recomm</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70 - University of Arkansas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>71 - University of California - Berkeley</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>72 - University of California - Davis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
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<td>73 - University of California - Irvine</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>74 - University of California - Los Angeles</td>
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<td>75 - University of California - Riverside</td>
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<td>77 - University of California - Santa Barbara</td>
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<td>79 - University of Central Florida</td>
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<td>80 - University of Cincinnati - Main Campus</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>81 - University of Colorado at Boulder</td>
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<td>82 - University of Colorado Denver</td>
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<td>86 - University of Georgia</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87 - University of Hawaii at Manoa</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88 - University of Houston</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89 - University of Idaho</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In my collection of “statement of purpose” prompts, “source URLs” were also collected. These URLs were the web addresses where the “statements of purpose” were located. I decided to collect this data as it seemed pertinent to collect where the prompts were sourced from, indicating departmental and administrative authorship (or design) and possible scope of audience. Figure 2.2 shows how Source URLs were collected and organized. These Source URLs\(^3\) provide the web pathway to the “statement of purpose prompt.” As shown by the URL for Colorado State University, the webpage is hosted on

---

\(^3\) All Source URLs were valid pathways during data collection in the fall of 2015.
an “English” webpage, rather than the “grad school” hosted webpage for Florida
International University.

Figure 2.2: Collection of Source URLs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Name</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Statement of Purpose</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colorado State University</td>
<td>CO</td>
<td>MA English</td>
<td>You will be asked to submit your statement of purpose online and may do so, but the online formatting is such that we ask you to also submit your statement of purpose (see details below) as a hard copy to the English Department....A statement of purpose (no more than one page, single-spaced), stating your goals while in graduate school. Please submit this statement to the Department even if you've submitted it with your online application.</td>
<td><a href="http://english.colostate.edu/grad/application-process/">http://english.colostate.edu/grad/application-process/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Atlantic University</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>MA English</td>
<td>Statement of personal objectives in essay form</td>
<td><a href="http://www.fiu.edu/graduate/programs/docs/ma_english.pdf">http://www.fiu.edu/graduate/programs/docs/ma_english.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida International University</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>MA English</td>
<td>Applicant Statement/Letter of Intent/Required (please submit through online application) Also stated that department can be contacted to find formatting requirements. No information provided on website.</td>
<td><a href="http://gradschool.fiu.edu/admissions/requirements.shtml">http://gradschool.fiu.edu/admissions/requirements.shtml</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These URLs could then be used to understand other data, such as the topic descriptions or how specific the prompt was in providing information relating the field the candidate is applying to. It would follow that if the prompt is housed on a graduate school webpage, their audience is much larger in scope (all interested applicants in graduate programs) than a prompt housed on an English graduate program webpage, whose audiences are only those interested applicants in the institution’s graduate program in English.

Therefore, there is the possibility that these prompts would be asking different things of candidates, which would be germane to my question on the kinds of writing promoted by this genre.

**Methods**

Nine category codes were used: “Format/Style,” “Topic Descriptions,” “Rhetorical Features,” “Scaffolding,” “Importance,” “Genre Name,” “Other Document,” and “No Description.” The categories were operationalized on different levels; while “Topic Descriptions” was commonly used to characterize a phrase of a required topic,
“Scaffolding,” was often used for sentence- or paragraph-level coding. This coding begun while reading through “statement of purpose” prompts. With an initial reading during collection of these prompts, “Format/Style” and “Topic Descriptions” emerged as possible codes. Upon rereading all of these prompts, starting with Arizona State University, I completed a first coding sequence in which I decided on initial versions of codes through recurring keywords or patterns that emerged through these texts. These codes were then revised and decided on during a recursive, ongoing coding process. As it seemed common for prompts to require a certain length of text that discussed particular topics; these codes seemed to emerge more naturally. On a whole, the words “long” or “page” emerged frequently, so I knew that directions relating to the “format/style” of a “statement of purpose” was a frequently occurring pattern. Variants of words like “discuss” and “describes” – which are then followed with lists of topics to be discussed – were also frequently occurring. As a result, “Format/Style” and “Topic Descriptions” became category codes and were loosely defined as as “spacing and length requirements” and “topics for candidates to write about.”

As my coding proceeded, new codes emerged and were added to my growing list of codes, which required later coding sessions to revise previous codes. As recurring keywords accumulated, I recorded the instances until I could decide on a label for the code category. For example, Clemson University was the first prompt to include directions on how to submit the “statement of purpose,” which required me to generate the “Submission” code. Further, it was not until George Mason University that I encountered the first lengthy “statement of purpose” prompt that required me to generate new codes: “Rhetorical Features” and “Lead” (later called “Scaffolding”). While I felt
that “Lead” was particularly important, as it provided moments in which the prompt provided guidance or some kind of leading moment, it wasn’t until later redefinition of this code that “Lead” became “Scaffolding.” As each of these new codes was generated, I would go back to previous prompts to code any textual moments that might belong to these codes and redefine these codes as they needed to evolve through the inclusion or removal of other instances.

For instance, in very early coding, “Rhetorical Features” was combined in “Format/Style,” because in the beginning of my coding process, “Rhetorical Features” had not really been set apart from the definition of “Format/Style,” as it did with later coding. However, as I reviewed codes, it seemed that these codes needed to be separated as textual moments that belong to “Format/Style” act more as a description of how the text should appear, whereas those textual moments coded as “Rhetorical Features” were those features that a candidate was directed to employ to accomplish demonstration of skill or an identity as a scholar. Indiana University (Purdue University - Indianapolis) asks candidates to “[p]lease use the following outline in writing your statement, being careful to answer all questions fully, providing examples and evidence where necessary.” By asking candidates to pay specific attention to provision of evidence and examples, they are asking candidates to demonstrate their scholarly skills of presenting evidence and examples, which is a way to answer the admission committee’s questions “fully” as a scholar. Furthermore, reminding candidates that they must also have the scholarly acumen to know when providing evidence is “necessary.” This example is very different than the “Format/Style” code examples from the beginning of the prompt: “(500-750 words),” “Please use the following outline in writing your statement.” Writing 500-700
words and using an outline are, rather, preferences to the appearance of the text and skills commonly required in high school writing assignments. By coding these prompts, I could see what these prompts were asking of candidates. Table 2.1 provides the definitions that were operationalized through coding and provides examples of these coded textual moments.

Table 2.1: Code Category Names and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Code Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Format/Style</td>
<td>Indicates required features such as length requirements, spacing, organization, notes to be “detailed” etc.</td>
<td>“…of 2 or 3 pages” (SUNY at Binghamton)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic Descriptions</td>
<td>These textual moments are the required topics for a statement of purpose, such as “preparedness,” “goals,” “interests,” “purpose,” etc.</td>
<td>“…describing your reasons for pursuing graduate study, your career aspirations, your special interests within your field, and any unusual features of your background that might need explanation or be of interest to the graduate admissions committee” (SUNY at Binghamton).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Features</td>
<td>This code is used when there are rhetorical features that candidates are requested to pay special attention to in the prompt in order to demonstrate skills or an identity as a scholar. (for example: specificity)</td>
<td>“…being careful to answer all questions fully, providing examples and evidence where necessary” (Indiana University (Purdue University - Indianapolis))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>“Scaffolding” is used for textual moments in which the designers provide information or guidance for the candidate (such as information about how the committee evaluates this genre, info on how to access resources to help the candidate write a statement of purpose)</td>
<td>“This statement will be read both for its content and as a sample of your writing ability, so be sure to spend an appropriate amount of time planning, writing, and revising it” (Indiana University (Purdue University - Indianapolis)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>Indicates directions to candidates on how to submit their texts</td>
<td>“Attach essay on separate page, or email attachment to <a href="mailto:graduate@umaine.com">graduate@umaine.com</a>)” (University of Maine).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>Indicates a statement to candidates on the higher importance or value placed on a statement of purpose over other materials</td>
<td>“We place great weight on your personal statement” (University of Massachusetts (Amherst)).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.1 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Name</th>
<th>Used to collect texts that appear to have the same function as a Statement of Purpose but referenced as a different name</th>
<th>“Personal Statement” (SUNY at Binghamton)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Document</td>
<td>Used to code when a secondary text was required with the “statement of purpose”</td>
<td>“Statement of Purpose, and the Personal History and Diversity Statement” (University of California (Davis)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Description</td>
<td>This code was only used if no description was able to be found, but rather only the genre name was listed.</td>
<td>“A statement of purpose” (Northern Illinois University)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To understand how these category codes worked, I chose to code more specific aspects of the prompt texts by using subcodes and context descriptor tags. As an example, SUNY at Binghamton’s “statement of purpose” prompt reads, “Personal statement of 2 to 3 pages describing your reasons for pursuing graduate study, your career aspirations, your special interests within your field, and any unusual features of your background that might need explanation or be of interest to the graduate admissions committee.” Through my coding, the text was broken up as follows:

[Personal statement] [of 2 to 3 pages] {[describing your reasons for pursuing graduate study,] [your career aspirations,] [your special interests within your field,] [and any unusual features of your background that might need explanation or be of interest to the graduate admissions committee.]}

These fragments of text, connected to their respective codes, appear in the following Table 2.2. Subcodes function to specify certain required features that relate to these nine higher hierarchical codes, providing me with an understanding of what prompts were really requiring. For example, instead of “Format/Style” requirements, I could easily see
that “length,” a subcode, was commonly used as a “Format/Style” requirement.

Accompanying these subcodes, context descriptor tags are also included in order to include words of phrases from the text to be more specific about how the subcode was being used by the designers of the prompt at a glance, so as to keep track of the variations from prompt to prompt.

Table 2.2: Example of Coding Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text from Prompt</th>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>Subcode</th>
<th>Context Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Personal statement]</td>
<td>Genre Name</td>
<td>Personal Statement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[of 2 to 3 pages]</td>
<td>Format/Style</td>
<td>Length</td>
<td>(2-3 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[describing your reasons for pursuing graduate study,]</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>(grad study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[your career aspirations,]</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>(career)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[your special interests within your field,]</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>(scholarly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[and any unusual features of your background that might need explanation or be of interest to the graduate admissions committee.]</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>(explain or details of interest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These codes were organized in an Excel spreadsheet to allow searching and filtering of codes, which allowed me to search for patterns in the “statement of purpose” prompts. On the Excel spreadsheet, universities were listed on the X-axis while coding categories were listed on the Y-axis. The subcodes and context descriptor tags associated with the category tag appear in corresponding cells. Figure 2.3 shows a screenshot of how this coding was organized for further analysis.
Figure 2.3: Screenshot of Coding Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format/Style</th>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th>Rhetorical Features</th>
<th>Lead</th>
<th>Submission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length (1-2 pages, single)</td>
<td>Background (Ed), Purpose (degree &amp; location), Experience, Goals (long-term), Concentration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (750 words)</td>
<td>Background (Ed), Purpose (degree &amp; location)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (1 or 2 pages, Spacing single or double)</td>
<td>Background (Ed, Course), Preparatory (for degree), Interests, Purpose (degree)</td>
<td>Purpose (final degree), Purpose (degree &amp; location)</td>
<td>Purpose (interim degree, Ed), Preparatory (for degree)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (less, Gen Style (biographical))</td>
<td>Goals (while in prog.)</td>
<td>Upload, Read copy, Ed Dept.</td>
<td>Upload</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (more than 1 page, Spacing single)</td>
<td>Experience (Ed, Prof.), Goals (Ed, Prof.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (250-350 words)</td>
<td>Intro Self (identifies specific), Purpose (degree &amp; location), Experience (Ed), Goals (Prof &amp; Personal) Through Examples: Inference, Exploration, Reflection, Previous work, Interests &amp; Reflection (Meta), Demands of prog. - Understanding, Competency (Goals)</td>
<td>Specificity Examples, Evaluation, Resources, Contact Dept.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (1 page)</td>
<td>Goals (Ed, course)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (500 words)</td>
<td>Goals (Ed, Immense (Sociology), Purpose (degree &amp; location), teaching, course, complication, pre-proposal (final degree) in Eng.</td>
<td>Consensus (other cases), Certificates (with M.A.), Student Stories (success-rate), Time (m1, m2, what topic), Through Example: Experience Teaching, course, Study Abroad, Previous Work</td>
<td>Provision of Evidence/Examples</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (550-700 words), Organization (outline provided), Complimenti (questions)</td>
<td>Preparatory (final degree), Goals (course, Interests) (research), Purpose (degree, location), Abilities (for grad studies at 0)</td>
<td>Evaluation (purpose - context &amp; sample of writing ability), Process (planning, writing, A: revising), Case Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (up to 500 words)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (650 words)</td>
<td>Goals (Ed, Immense (Sociology))</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (less)</td>
<td>Goals, Interests</td>
<td>Evaluation (Assumptions - all considered)</td>
<td>Online or Email</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (250-350 words), Organization (1st line)</td>
<td>Experience (Ed, course)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (1 page)</td>
<td>Goals, Interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed</td>
<td>Purpose (degree &amp; location for study), Experience (Ed, course, Transferable to new U)</td>
<td>Process (Fielding - correctly)</td>
<td>On Sheet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose (Degree), Experience (related to teaching (degree &amp; location))</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goals (Grad Studies), Interests (Personal, Ed,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Boundary Cases**

Of course, not every case was easily categorized. For example, University of Connecticut’s prompt reads, “The committee wants to know those things about you which cannot be expressed quantitatively.” This textual moment proved to be difficult to code. While there seemed to be a statement about the importance of a “statement of purpose,” this statement seemed to do more. After providing a list of topics that would prove “helpful,” the following statement that the “committee wants to know those things about you which cannot be expressed quantitatively” seems to suggest that this is the purpose of a “statement of purpose” — to provide qualitative information. This “statement of purpose,” then does something different than other required texts that provide
quantitative information, such as GRE scores or transcripts. This complex statement seemed to provide scaffolding for candidates as they drafted and revised a “statement of purpose,” to take care to create this “statement of purpose” with an aim to provide qualitative information. As a result of this reasoning, I chose to code this sentence under two codes: “Scaffold” and “Importance.” In this coding situation, choosing to code this textual moment as (1) scaffolding candidates and (2) providing value for this genre, indicates the complexity of this textual moment as it is dually coded while still providing myself with a more accurate understanding of how University of Connecticut was seeking to scaffold candidates by giving candidates an idea of why this genre is so important.

In another example, George Mason University includes this note in their “statement of purpose” prompt, “…you should strive to be as specific as you can about your prior college-level experience studying English in its various manifestations.” While this textual moment includes topic descriptions, the moment instructing candidates to “strive to be as specific as you can about…” led to my decision to code this instance as “Rhetorical Features” rather than “Format/Style,” which was my original classification of this textual moment. As this note to be specific is accompanied with a note of what to be specific about (“prior college-level experience studying English in its various manifestations”), I felt that this ability to be specific is more associated with the scholarly skill of selecting appropriate examples to provide a level of specificity in their texts to fulfill a textual purpose, such as demonstrating “preparedness for rigorous graduate study” (George Mason University, “statement of purpose” prompt). Thus, this textual
moment fell under the definition for “Rhetorical Features” rather than to the appearance or style of the submitted text (i.e. Format/Style).

Meanwhile, “specificity” was required by other prompts. However, these textual moments seemed to belong under “Format/Style” rather than “Rhetorical Features.” In Mississippi State University’s prompt, they note for candidates to “On this sheet, write a detailed and carefully edited statement….” In this section of their prompt, the designers use “detailed” as a description of the “statement.” The reader is not made aware of what kinds of descriptions would be most useful but it almost seems to be a comment about preferred length, or can be perceived to take the place of a length requirement, which does not appear otherwise in this prompt. Therefore, the use of “detailed” seems to be associated with the style of the text, which might be interpreted as needing to contain many details, which would make the text “longer,” and thus, it was categorized under “Format/Style” rather than “Rhetorical Features.”

Another feature that required my discretion during coding was the subcode “purpose.” Given that the name of the genre is typically the “statement of purpose” and thus appeared in a majority of prompts, it only appeared three separate times with a function other than “Genre Name” or “Scaffolding.” These three instances lie under “Topic Descriptions,” as they are topics required of candidates. These instances appear as: “…your purpose in seeking a graduate degree at Ball State University” (Ball State University), “…indicating your purpose and objective in pursuing graduate study at Mississippi State University” (Mississippi State University), and “…purpose for attending graduate school” (University of South Florida (Tampa)). As demonstrated through these instances, there is a pattern to the context surrounding the use of “purpose.”
It seems to be associated with the reasoning behind a choice or intention of the candidate.

“Reasoning,” as a topic, appears in many “statement of purpose” prompts, so all of these “reasoning” instances were coded as the subcode “purpose.” Thus, while these three examples were coded: “Topic: Purpose (degree @ location)” (Ball State University), “Topic: Purpose (grad study @ location)” (Mississippi State University), and “Topic: Purpose (grad school)” (University of South Florida (Tampa)), the other instances that used “reasons behind” in lieu of “purpose” were also sub coded as “Purpose.” For example, the textual moment in SUNY at Binghamton’s prompt, which reads, “Personal statement of 2 to 3 pages describing your reasons for pursuing graduate study,” is coded “Topic: Purpose (grad study).” Because I wanted to ensure that if other textual moments with the word “reasoning” were to emerge in prompts, I chose to code all instances of this topic as “Purpose” for more efficient coding. These boundary cases identify some of the more difficult decisions in coding and serve as a reminder that this study’s coding decisions were not easily made but required careful considerations in many cases, reflecting how language is more complex than categories.

**Analysis**

The number of required genres was calculated in order to determine the mode for how many genres a candidate is most commonly required to submit for admission. As seen in Figure 2.4, genre requirements were kept in a spreadsheet. This data was kept in rows “E” through “Q.” To calculate the number of required genres for each institution, I used an equation in row “T” to calculate this information (shown in Figure 2.4). Excel provides the capability of counting the number of blank cells, so I used this feature to determine the remaining cells, which had data in them. Since there were a total of thirteen
rows of data, I subtracted the number of blank cells by the possible number of cells per row (13). This resulted in the following equation where \( n \) equals the row number:

\[
13 - (COUNTBLANK(En:Qn)).
\]

As shown in Figure 2.4, row “T” shows the number of marked cells, indicating how many genres are required by each institution. Another Excel function, “MODE.MULT,” was then used. This function allows the return of multiple modes, in the case that there is more than one mode found in the data range, and the range (T2:T148) was applied for a final equation: \( MODEMULT(T2:T148) \). The mode was then returned, signifying the most common number of application materials that were required across all researched institutions.

**Figure 2.4: Screenshot of the “Number of Required Genres”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Name</th>
<th>TOEFL/IELTS CV/Resume</th>
<th>Departmental Questionnaire/APP</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
<th>Num of Required Genres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona State University</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Auburn University Main Campus</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball State University</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowling Green State University - Main Campus</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese University</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland State University</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of William and Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado School of Mines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado State University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To discover which genres were those most commonly required by universities, a similar equation was used to calculate the number of times each genre was required or recommended of candidates:

\[
147 - (COUNTBLANK(n2:n148)) (n = the column letter associated with the genre).
\]

Each total was then divided into the total number of researchable universities (123) to find the percentage of universities that require each genre. For example, to find how often institutions required or recommended the GRE General Test, the following equation was applied:

\[
\frac{N \text{ of institutions requiring GRE General Test}}{N \text{ of universities}} = \frac{110}{123} = 0.8943089... = 89%.
\]

This data informed me on which genres were the most commonly required, and thus make up the current canon of graduate matriculation examinations, answering my first research question.
In exploration of my second research question, the collected codes were organized into a spreadsheet (as shown in Figure 2.3), and the frequency was found for each coding category, indicating generally what codes these prompts consisted of: format/style directions, topic descriptions, rhetorical preferences/directions, textual scaffolding moments, directions of how to submit this text, comments on the importance of a “statement of purpose,” a genre name other than “statement of purpose,” or directions to include an additional document with the “statement of purpose.” Frequency of code categories enables me to understand how common codes were among all “statement of purpose” prompts, which could indicate what seems to be most important to prompt designers when designing a “statement of purpose” prompt. The frequency was found by taking the number of instances each code was used in prompts and dividing it by (1) the number of institutions that required a “statement of purpose” and have the opportunity to provide a prompt (108 institutions) and (2) the number of prompts that were actually available for candidates to view (102 prompts).

For example, in calculating the frequency of prompts that include a description of “Format/Style,” I used Excel’s filtering feature to deselect “Blanks,” as shown in Figure 2.5). This process only shows those records that include codes under “Format/Style.” After blank records are eliminated, Excel will show how many records are remaining (see Figure 2.6). I also recounted all remaining records to ensure accuracy. I then calculated the frequency of institutions that used “Format/Style” in their “statement of purpose” prompts:

\[
\frac{(N \text{ of prompts using "Format/Style"})}{(N \text{ of "statement of purpose" prompts})} = \frac{84}{102} \approx 0.823529\ldots \approx 82\%.
\]

With the percentage of prompts that use “Format/Style” calculated, I could then understand how commonly
“Format/Style” was used by all institutions that require a “statement of purpose” (78% - from 108 institutions) and how often these features were required in prompts that were provided to the candidate (82% - from 102 prompts).

Figure 2.5: Screenshot of Deselecting the “(Blanks)” Records Under “Format/Style”

To understand more about how these codes were functioning, the frequencies of subcodes for format/length, topic descriptions, genre name, submission, and scaffolding were calculated. These categories seemed to be most commonly used among prompts and were thus considered to factor heavily in the genre of “statements of purpose” by the sheer number of universities using these codes. To calculate these frequencies, Excel’s
filtering feature was used to isolate each subcode. For example, to isolate those prompts with length requirements, the “filter button” next to the desired coding category (“Format/Style”) was pressed, which brought up the “Format/Style” dialogue box (as shown in Figure 2.7). Under “Filter,” the first “Choose One” drop down list would need to read “Contains;” this feature allows isolation of all records with a particular word or phrase. In the adjacent box, the appropriate subcode that needs to be isolated (in this example, “Length”) should by entered. After isolating “length” requirements, the number of remaining records were recorded (74), and this number was divided into (1) how many prompts included directions/preferences on “Format/Style,” and (2) the number of coded prompts.

By analyzing the subcodes in these code categories, I could better understand what formatting and style preferences were most commonly required in a “statement of purpose,” the topics that make up this text, how institutions work to scaffold candidates to design a “statement of purpose,” and by what name this text was most commonly referred to. These inquiries aided me in my understanding of what features were patterns of what it means to write a “statement of purpose” as a genre with its own conventions that assist it in serving a purpose for multiple audiences, and this information worked to answer my second research question on the conventions of this genre and the writing being promoted through “statement of purpose” prompts.
My third research question emerged as I saw that there were variations of similar names used to describe this same text, many of which were interesting variations that seemed to say different things about the genre. To accomplish calculating frequencies for “genre name,” the different names were categorized into the following categories: (1) names focused on “goals” or “objectives,” (2) names associated with being a “letter,” (3) genre names of “personal” statement/essay, (4) “statement of purpose,” (5) names that alter depending on what program/concentration a candidate applies to, (6) other names that could not be associated with any previously named category. Each title was recorded under one of the newly created “genre name” categories. For example, SUNY at Binghamton titles this genre by “Personal Statement,” which is coded under as a “personal” statement/essay. University of Alaska Fairbanks titles this text “Statement of Academic Goals” and University of Central Florida uses the title “Goal Statement;” both of these titles are coded under category (1): names focused on “goals” or “objectives.” Each categories’ total was then divided into the number of “statement of purpose” prompts to understand what names were most commonly used by institutions.
Textual moments of scaffolding were further analyzed to determine not only how many institutions did or did not include scaffolding but also whether these scaffolded prompts were housed in the English department or in a different department. To understand where the prompts were housed, the website urls were recorded in the spreadsheet and the filtering feature was used to search for “Contains” “english” (Figure 2.8) and “Does Not Contain” “english” (Figure 2.9). All “Does Not Contain english” records were checked over for webpages not associated with academic departments. For example, while many of these prompts appeared on a graduate school webpage, others appeared in webpages housed by the Science and Humanities Departments. To identify where these prompts were located, it was recorded whether the prompts were located on “English” (and other academic department hosted websites) or graduate school offices. This information assisted me in understanding how wide of a scope the prompt designers’ potential audience of candidates was, which might speculate reasons for certain choices made in the design of the “statement of purpose” prompts. Corollary to this point is that candidates also have a large scope of potential audiences as they compose a “statement of purpose;” are they writing for “professors in their field” or staff members who are committees in the graduate admissions committee?
These numbers were further used to determine if there was a relationship between where the prompt was sourced, the use of topic descriptions, and whether the designers of the prompt used scaffolding strategies. To begin this work, I filtered (as shown in Figure 2.5) to eliminate all “(Blank)” records in the “Scaffolding” and “Topic” columns, and
each of their remaining records were recorded, which told me how many institutions used these coding categories in their prompts. These numbers were then compared to the numbers of how many prompts were located in the “English” Department vs those housed in “Graduate School Office” or graduate admissions (GA) office hosted webpages. This work helped me understand if there were any trends with being sourced from the “English” Department or a different department. Because of the differences in “Genre Names” and sources for prompts indicated potential differences, this work gave me more knowledge to answer my third research question on the potential hidden tensions that might hinder candidates as they compose a “statement of purpose.”

Topic descriptors that were used as examples in prompts were also analyzed; this analysis served to determine which topics the designers felt needed to be scaffolded further for candidates and what topics were used in this effort to scaffold. For example, Rutgers University - Newark makes this prompt available to candidates:

Your statement of purpose should be no longer than 2 pages, double-spaced, and should focus on your academic experience and interests. We are primarily interested in details about your intellectual interests (what he or she would like to study and why), as well as any relevant details about English coursework already completed. Applicants to the Ph.D. program should identify a primary area of interest; MA applicants need not do so. Details about academic accomplishments such as publications, presentations at conferences, etc. should also be included.

In this prompt, there are moments of scaffolding that work to provide the candidate some kind of context for what the evaluators intend by “academic experience” and “interest.”
The designers give details on what it is that they are most interested in reading from candidates as their readers and evaluators. These specific moments were coded as “Scaffold: Examples.” However, the actual examples were also coded, but as they are example topics, they are coded as “Topic” descriptions (ex. Topic: Area of Study). Coding these instances allowed me to search through these topics and analyze patterns of most commonly occurring scaffolded examples. In tracking these examples used to scaffold candidates in their responses assisted me in answering my third research question, as this information points to potential tensions that are hidden to candidates and are not scaffolded to better understand this information which could potentially assist them in composing their response.

As shown in Figure 2.10, while examples of topic descriptions were coded and organized with topic descriptions required in prompts, they are separated from these other codes to keep them searchable. In order to search for these codes, a similar method was used from Figure 2.9.

Figure 2.10: Screenshot of Cell with Examples of “Topic Descriptions”

In the “Topic” dialogue box for filtering, all prompts were searched for containing “example,” to isolate all instances of the word “example” (Figure 2.11). The remaining records were then documented, and the subtotals of these examples were then divided into the number of prompts that included scaffolded examples of topic descriptions.
Frequencies for how often the most commonly occurring topic descriptions occurred by themselves, with the other top codes, and with both codes was also analyzed to determine whether there was a relationship between these topic codes. These codes were analyzed by using the filtering feature to isolate codes that appear together. As demonstrated by Figure 2.12, this task is accomplished by using “Contains” from the “Topic” filtering dialogue box to isolate more than one code, such as “interest” and “purpose.” The remaining records were documented for each combination of the three most commonly used codes. These results were then compared to see if there was any pattern behind the use of these three codes. Patterns or lack of patterns might indicate relationships between information or hidden tensions hindering candidates as they compose, further adding to an answer for my third research question.
These analytic methods were used to assist me towards answering my research questions. While my work with required genres allowed me to obtain an answer to my question about the current canon of graduate matriculation examination texts, my work with coding “statement of purpose” prompts, led to my question of what kinds of writing these genres were promoting over other kinds of writing. By looking at the frequencies of codes and their subcodes, such as formatting/style and length or various topic descriptions and scaffolding, I can see what patterns emerge in an effort to respond to an emerging question of (1) what conventions make up a “statement of purpose” and (2) how the prompts are constructed to give students an idea how to design a “statement of purpose” indicating what kinds of writing these prompts promote. As to my question of the tensions underlying this genre, my work with how prompts are sourced, “Scaffolding,” and possible relationships allowed me to look closely into the tensions behind the “personal” and its inclusion or exclusion in the “statement of purpose” genre. To do this work, I looked at texts with various “Genre Names” and decided to look more closely into “Personal Statements.” I compared how prompt designers of “Personal
Statements” discussed and scaffolded the “personal” in comparison to prompts for “statements of purpose” by other “Genre Names.”
CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS

Current Canon: Exploring The Common Genres

In my research on the current canon of required matriculation genres, a candidate applying to a terminal MA program in English will be most commonly asked to submit 7 different genres as s/he works to enter a new activity system. As Figure 3.1 demonstrates, a submission of seven genres is required by 33% of the population. 72% of universities require between 6 and 8 matriculation texts, and 88% require between 5 and 8 genres for admission.

Figure 3.1: Number of Genres Required for Application

While candidates are required to submit between 5 and 8 genres for admission, it appears that there are five genres that are requested most commonly (Table 3.1). These five genres answer my first research question on what genres are most commonly asked for in matriculation assessment examinations. Universities with high or very high level of research activity require candidates for matriculation to include the following genres in
their applications for admission: (1) a copy of transcripts/GPA, (2) letters of recommendation, (3) statement of purpose, (4) writing samples, and (5) GRE General Test scores. These top genres have been determined as the current canon by being required by over 75% of universities.

These common “5 to 8 required genres” could be a range of combinations from the emergent genres: “statement of purpose,” writing samples, GRE General Test, Letters of Recommendation, Transcripts/GPA, CV/Resume, GRE Subject Test, Departmental Questionnaire/Application, Residency Application, Interview, and/or Portfolio. However, 80% of universities require all five of the top genres, demonstrating how commonly required these genres are in making matriculation decisions.

Table 3.1: Current Canon of Graduate Matriculation Examinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Percentage of Institutions Requiring this Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Sample</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE General</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters of Recommendation</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts/GPA</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these results, “Application Form,” which can be more specifically defined as a form in which candidates are required to fill out “basic information” such as name, contact info, program of application, specialization, etc., was also included as a highly requested genre with 83% of universities requiring this genre. However, this result only reflected those institutions who had this genre listed in their application directions and excluded those institutions who might have decided that this step was easily assumed, as it appeared in their application module, requiring “basic information” from applicants. Thus, without the ability to account for all researched institutions without applying to each one, this genre has been omitted from my research.
There were still many genres that institutions chose to require for admissions that were not widely required by all researched institutions (See Table 3.2 for a list of the other genres required). The genres range in generic purposes. For example, 26% of institutions required a curriculum vitae (CV)/resume, which would detail either their full academic career with publications and conferences attended or a short minimalist “resume” with their pertinent career experiences and job duties. Other institutions (11%) required the GRE Subject Test in English, which “are achievement tests that measure your [candidates’] knowledge of a particular field of study,” which ETS notes will help candidates “stand out from other applicants by emphasizing [their] knowledge and skill level in a specific area” (ETS, “About the GRE Subject Tests”), commonly believed to reflect the candidates’ knowledge in the field of English Literature.

Departmental Questionnaires/Applications were required by 7% of the institutions studied, which would allow departments to ask candidates questions that the faculty thought were pertinent to making admissions decisions or to make decisions on departmental aid. 5% of institutions required information from candidates on their residential status, which would allow them to determine what tuition rate to provide the candidate. Surprisingly, only Temple University required an interview, and George Mason University was the only institution to require a portfolio (required of its professional writing and rhetoric concentration applicants). The interview could provide information about personality or the way candidates carry conversations about (for instance) their field or goals, and a portfolio provides a collection of works designed and worked on by the candidate from a range of contexts in which the candidate spent time revising and reconfiguring that they are proud of and feel reflect their preparedness for
graduate study. These different purposes might further influence the diverse requirements and possible varied weightings that might be attributed to these different genres.

Table 3.2: Other Required Genres for Matriculation Applications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Percentage of Institutions Requiring this Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CV/Resume</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE Subject Test</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental Questionnaire/Application</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residency Application/Information</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolio</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These genres are interesting in their various purposes, and while it makes sense why these genres might prove useful in making decisions on candidates, it is curious why a genre like a portfolio or interview is not required by more than one institution. The lack of these requirements might infer a couple of different possibilities. These institutions might not believe an interview or portfolio to be as useful to making a matriculation decision than those genres graduate admissions committees are currently using. Some institutions might not consider some of these genres (such as a portfolio) to be feasible options, because of the time necessary to dedicate to evaluation of the genre or necessary resources that aren’t available. It could also be that some of these genres are not even considered options for assisting in matriculation decisions. Or perhaps while some of these genres have either fallen out of favor (i.e. GRE Subject Test or interviews) or have not been widely accepted as useful towards making matriculation decisions, the current canon might be a reflection of the sedimented use of these genres; these genres, commonly used for matriculation decisions, might not be reevaluated by admissions committees to determine each genre’s usefulness towards matriculation decisions. Over many years, universities make many matriculation decisions, which has become a
recurrent situation, and to refer back to the “Introduction,” these histories are crucial to
the function of the activity of making matriculation decisions. Some genres might
become sedimented in the activity of making matriculation decisions. This interaction is
discussed by Devitt (2004) in her text about genres. She notes that “[p]art of what readers
and writers recognize when they identify genres are the roles they are to play, the roles
being played by other people, what they can gain from the discourse, and what the
discourses are about” (p. 12). As the prompt designers recognize the “role they [the
genres] are to play” in this activity, particular genres come to mind. The genre’s purposes
and roles are recognized as tools in accomplishing this action and other possible
matriculation genres might not be recognized as options. The data from my inquiry into
the current canon of graduate admissions suggests that while there is a general consensus
of what genres are useful in matriculation decisions, there is a much larger network of
genres that (for various purposes) are included as matriculation genres. While this project
does not set out to “reevaluate” the current canon genres or to study all of the many
genres being required across matriculation examinations, I do analyze one genre in the
current canon, the “statement of purpose,” to better understand the conventions of this
genre and the kinds of writing it promotes.

“Statement of Purpose:” Understanding The Genre

My second question (what kinds of writing does the “statement of purpose” genre
promote?) is answered with my work of coding “statements of purpose” prompts. Out of
all the codes used, two codes appeared more than 80% of the time in prompts that were
made available to candidates: “Format/Style” and “Topic Description” (See Table 3.3).
While the other code categories were not as frequently used as directions for the
appearance of the text or the required topics to be discussed, “Scaffolding,” “Submission,” and “Genre Name” seem to stand out amongst the remaining code categories, all used between 23%-43% of the time in available prompts.

Table 3.3: Frequency of Code Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>How frequently this code was used in available prompts ((\frac{n}{102}))</th>
<th>Frequency amongst institutions that require a “statement of purpose” ((\frac{n}{108}))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Format/Style</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic Description</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Features</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Name</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Req. Text</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data in Table 3.3 indicates the authorial choices that prompt designers are making as they design these prompts for candidates. As demonstrated by the frequency of each code, “Format/Style” and “Topic Descriptions” are more commonly used by these designers than features like “Submission” directions and “Scaffolding.” By this information, it seems that, overall, these prompts are promoting format-driven writing on particular topics. Like describing what topics to write about, there is a priority on describing the format/style requirements for this genre, which might reflect that designers, in their descriptions of “statements of purpose,” might not know how else to describe what they expect from candidates and thus revert to describing those more tangible characteristics, like formatting and style. Further, because prompt designers might not know how else to describe this genre, this might further indicate the tacit knowledge that, while accessible to these designers, will not be accessible to candidates writing a “statement of purpose” without more explicit scaffolding in the prompt. And while this data indicates that “Topic Descriptions” and “Format/Style” are more
commonly used in “statement of purpose” prompts, taking a closer look at these code categories will be useful in understanding how these codes function in the prompts. Thus, to understand these code categories further, an analysis of these codes’ subcodes follows.

**Frequencies of Subcodes**

**Format/Style.** The subcodes that were used with the “Format/Style” code can be found with their frequencies in Table 3.4. Definitions of these subcodes can be found in Appendix B. As demonstrated in this table, “Length” was by far the most frequently used subcode, employed 88% of the time in all prompts using “Format/Style” directions and 73% over all prompts available to candidates. The remaining codes occur infrequently in comparison to how frequently “length” appears, “spacing” and “genre style” appearing only 1/6 and 1/8 of the time that some kind of “length” requirement appears.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format/Style Subcode</th>
<th>Frequency of subcode in prompts with “Format/Style” directions</th>
<th>Frequency of subcode amongst all available prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spacing</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Style</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typed</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Dept (for “F/S” directions)</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG#s</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For “Genre Style,” another infrequently used subcode, the context descriptors used were “intellectual biography” (1% of prompts with the “Genre Style” subcode), “essay” (22%), and “letter” (67%). The subcode “Genre Style” was used to inform the candidate of writing in “essay” form or describing the text as a “letter,” thus giving directions to candidates on the format the “statement of purpose” should take. As mentioned previously, “Spacing” also occurred infrequently, and 69% of prompts that
had preferences for “spacing” required the “statement of purpose” to be double spaced. The remaining prompts either required single spaced text (23%) or gave the choice of either single or double spaced (8%). However, overall, while these subcodes were used by some institutions, most institutions who provided “Format/Style” directions required a particular length of text. And again, it might be that prompt designers, having a tacit knowledge of the expectations for this prompt, might not know how to talk about this text in a way that would be useful for candidates, resulting in prompts that discuss the required length rather than context for other important aspects of the genre. This discussion of “length” does allow us to understand more about what kind of length is most commonly required, and thus, addresses the question of what conventions are most common in this genre, and what kinds of writing are being promoted.

**Length.** The context descriptors for “length” were also analyzed for frequency. The most commonly asked for page length is between one and two pages (approx. 250-500 words). These top length requirements can be found in Figure 3.2. The required word lengths were converted to page count for consistency, which would put 250-500 words between 0.6 – 1.3 pages (single spaced) or 1 – 2.1 pages (double spaced). The data in Figure 3.2 includes page length requirements and converted word count requirements. As there was quite a range of length requirements, converting word count to page count kept the data congruent in order to determine the most commonly required length requirement for a “statement of purpose,” which is between one and two pages. While “2-3 pages” was also common in comparison with some of the other data, 2 out of 6 of these prompts require the 2-3 pages to be “double spaced” (the most commonly required space requirement). Thus length requirements might be best represented by stating that 65% of
institutions consider a “statement of purpose” to be somewhere between 1-2 pages, or if double spaced (most commonly requested spacing requirement), 2-3 pages.

Figure 3.2: Frequencies of “Length” Context Descriptor Tags

As the most commonly occurring context descriptor tags indicate, these prompts request candidates to write a “statement of purpose” of approximately 1-2 single spaced (2-3 double spaced) pages. Further, a text of 1-2 pages can be perceived as a “short” text to prompt designers, as 63% of the time that the tags “Succinct,” “Short,” and “Brief” were used, the prompt also included a length requirement from approximately 1 page to 2 pages. The other 38% of instances did not include any other notes about length besides some instruction to be “brief,” and if these tags’ instances (“Succinct,” “Short,” and “Brief”) are combined (as they are all synonyms), there are eight institutions (10% of institutions with Format/Style requirements) that ask for “brief” “Statements of Purpose.” Again, this common choice that designers make to describe formatting and length requirements can point to the potentially vast knowledge that is tacit to designers that is
not shared with candidates, because length and format are tangible compositional qualities that are more readily available for discussion and thus described in their writing prompts for “statements of purpose.” Therefore, these prompts are promoting “brief” texts that are focused around the length and formatting used to discuss the required topics.

**Topic Descriptions.** Topic descriptions were provided in 86 prompts that were provided to candidates (84%). These topics ranged widely; however there were three topics that emerged most frequently (see Table 3.5). “Goals,” “Interests,” and “Purpose” appeared in at least 48% of prompts providing topic descriptions, indicating that most institutions considered these topics to be most relevant to selecting candidates for graduate study.

“Purpose” appears in 48% of prompts, “Interests” is used in 56%, and “Goals” appears in 64% of these prompts. While other codes, such as “Experience,” “Background,” and “Preparedness” were also important to institutions, these topics were still only required by 13-23% of institutions researched, and all other codes were required by <10% of institutions.

Table 3.5: “Topic Description” Subcode Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Number of prompts requesting topic</th>
<th>Frequency among prompts with “topic descriptions” $\frac{n}{86}$</th>
<th>Frequency amongst the available prompts $\frac{n}{102}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because I was only interested in topic descriptions that occurred in at least four institutions, those topics\textsuperscript{4} that were eliminated from Table 3.5 include the following:


“Goals,” “Interests,” and “Purpose” appear in 82 prompts out of 86 prompts coded with “Topic Description,” indicating that 95% of the time prompts with a description of “topics” required candidates to talk about one or some combination of these topics and of all available prompts, 80% provided directions for candidates to discuss one or some combination of these topics. In these 82 prompts, these subcodes occur together in 9 prompts (11%), occur with one other top subcode in 44 prompts (51%), and without the other top codes in 29 prompts (34%). Most frequently, “goals” and “interests” appear together in the same 21 prompts (24%) (See Figure 3.3 for a breakdown of subcode pairings).

\begin{table}[htp]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|}
\hline
Benefit & 8 & 9\% & 8\% \\
\hline
Area of Study & 7 & 8\% & 8\% \\
\hline
Qualifications & 5 & 6\% & 5\% \\
\hline
Training & 5 & 6\% & 5\% \\
\hline
Skills & 4 & 5\% & 4\% \\
\hline
Compatibility / Fit & 4 & 5\% & 4\% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Table 3.5 continued}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{4} Eliminated topic description subcodes are defined in Appendix C.
As demonstrated by this data, the three most commonly required topics for candidates to discuss (Goals, Interests, and Purpose) represent the topics most common, and perhaps typified as useful to matriculation decisions, and thus trusted, by prompt designers as assisting them in making matriculation decisions. While these topics are similar, the overlap between these topics indicates that prompt designers see these topics as different and perhaps useful for reaching a matriculation decision in a multifaceted approach, each adding to a perspective of the candidates’ “fit” (for instance) in the program. Do the candidates’ goals align with those goals of the department? Do their interests align with those of faculty, curriculum, and the programs’ resources? Does the purpose why they choose to attend the university demonstrate an understanding of how they see the program contributing to the accomplishment of their goals and interests and
(perhaps) how the candidates might benefit the program? The overlap in Figure 3.3 not only seems to represent a consensus amongst admissions committees on the topic content of a “statement of purpose,” but indicates that each topic description is useful to the admissions committee in differing ways, indicating further that there is a tacit knowledge behind the topic description that, depending on whether scaffolding is used by the prompt designers, has the potential to be misinterpreted due to the lack of transparency of this tacit knowledge.

A candidate reading the prompt might not see a difference between “goals” and “interests,” or might not be able to anticipate the assumptions behind these topics, such as “purpose.” This might be best seen through a reading of one prompt (from Louisiana Tech University) juxtaposed with the example of another prompt (from University of Vermont) using similar wording, since I don’t have access to each prompt designers’ tacit expectations. For example, Louisiana Tech University provides this prompt to candidates: “A one-page statement of purpose outlining your goals and areas of interest.” With this prompt, a candidate might interpret “goals” as meaning after s/he has graduated, prompting a discussion of how their career goals can benefit from their potential education. “[A]reas of interest” might be interpreted as what area of study or concentration might be of most interest to her/him, and this interpretation could lead the candidate to craft a discussion about why they are interested in pursuing Louisiana Tech University’s emphasis in British and American Literature (and maybe their special interest in studying American Literature). Candidates might assume that a short discussion of their research area or a couple of sentences expressing their interest in “post-modernism” would be enough.
This interpretation might not align with expectations; the committee might be expecting candidates to be more specific with their response, maybe expecting candidates to discuss their “research interests” as the University of Arkansas requests. Louisiana Tech University’s prompt illustrates the mismatch between what prompt designers need to be explicit about and what, if allowed to remain tacit, can cause problems. If Louisiana Tech does not make their expectations transparent in their prompt, the tacit knowledge required to understand and respond to the prompt will cause problems for candidates without this knowledge. The Louisiana Tech graduate admissions committee might expect candidates to draw from certain theories or scholarly trends or particular texts that interest her/him and reasoning behind these interests. Further, an applicant to Louisiana Tech University might not anticipate an expectation behind “goals” to mean “what you wish to accomplish as a graduate student,” as used by the University of Missouri (Columbia), possibly prompting a candidate to be overlooked because of a lack of specificity, and this lack of specificity might lead to assumptions that the candidate did not invest the time to research the university or that they are not prepared for the graduate study they seek matriculation into, a serious judgment on the candidate.

The University of Vermont is another example in which there is a mismatch of what should be explicit in the prompt and what remains tacit, causing problems for candidates. University of Vermont’s prompt designers want candidates to “outline your [their] reasons for wishing to undertake graduate study….” In this instance of requesting a candidate to discuss their “purpose” for undertaking graduate study, a candidate might detail her/his personal experience of watching their parents struggling to “get ahead” in their careers, which in part motivates her/him to pursue graduate study. On the other
hand, the readers might have expectations that a candidate should respond to this part of the prompt in a way that is not so “personal” or in a way that reflects the ideals of scholarly inquiry. The readers might further expect the candidate to craft their response to this prompt specifically to the specific degree program or emphasis they are applying to, thus expecting that candidates will know that the designers’ use of “graduate study” in the prompt might be general to allow all programs to use the same prompt, thus requiring each candidate to be specific to their degree program: graduate studies in English, American Literature, Composition Studies, or Technical Writing. This lack of specificity in the candidate’s “statement of purpose” could again lead to being overlooked as “unprepared” or as not “fitting in” with the empirical mindset of the institution, and explicit scaffolding could share knowledge with the candidate about these tacit expectations, leading to a situation in which the candidate could craft a “statement of purpose” that demonstrates their ability to meet the expectations of the graduate admissions committee. In regards to what kinds of writing are being promoted through “statement of purpose” prompts, this “statement of purpose” genre promotes writing focused on addressing concepts of “goals,” “interests,” and “purpose,” but these topics are potentially defined differently depending on the context the prompt is situated within.

**Genre Name.** Genre names varied from prompt to prompt with 40% of universities choosing to refer to this genre by names other than “statement of purpose.” Other names were categorized into the following categories: (1) names focused on “goals” or “objectives,” (2) names associated with being a “letter,” (3) “personal” statement/essay, (4) “statement of purpose,” (5) names that alter depending on what program/concentration a candidate applies to, and (6) other names that could not be
associated with any previously named category. These different genre names seem to reflect alternative generic purposes, and possibly alternative audiences, and content and writing conventions to achieve the purpose.

Table 3.6: Frequencies of “Genre Names”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Name</th>
<th>% of prompts with alternative genre names (i.e. Not including “Statement of Purpose”)</th>
<th>% of prompts available ( \frac{n}{102} )</th>
<th>Frequency amongst institutions that require a “statement of purpose” ( \frac{n}{108} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals/Objectives</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Personal” Statement/Essay</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Names depending on program applying to</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Names</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the most common genre name for this text is a “statement of purpose” with 64% of prompts using this name (60% of universities referring to this genre as a “statement of purpose”). The other 36% of prompts are broken into name categories as seen in Table 3.6. As shown here, the most common names besides “statement of purpose,” are either a “Personal Statement/Essay” with 17% of universities referring to the genre by this name or names referring to “Goals/Objectives,” used by 10% of institutions providing prompts. However, these genre names are only used by 27% of universities that make prompts available to candidates, excluding those universities that do not provide a prompt with the listed genre on their webpage. This data indicates that “Statement of Purpose” seems to be the most commonly used and recognized name for
this genre. Genre names are important choices as the name signals to candidates some information about the text they are composing (see Brown, 2004).

While a “Letter of Intent” might tell candidates that they need to compose the text in a letter format, writing to their evaluators about those things they intend to accomplish while in graduate school, a “Personal Statement/Essay” might then indicate to candidates that they are to compose an essay on themselves – a seemingly different text than a “Letter of Intent.” Thus, the genre name can promote different genres of writing as well, and while out of the scope of my study, answers might be reached through a usability study. These differences in “Genre Names” can also suggest that there are possibly other differences connected to the use of a different “Genre Name,” such as a different audience or difference in expected topic descriptions. Most importantly, these different “Genre Names” might also suggest occluded tensions underlying this genre and the designers’ tacit knowledge surrounding expectations of these possible variations of the “statement of purpose.” These underlying tensions are discussed in more length later in this chapter and in the following “Discussion” along with discussions of assumptions of candidates’ knowledge.

Submission. “Submission” directions were provided in 23 prompts, or 23% of all available prompts. These directions varied, depending on preferences of the department, who would be evaluating these prompts, or a global requirement by the graduate school. Subcodes were divided between those directions to candidates to submit their “statement of purpose” in the following methods: (1) electronic submission (57%), (2) print Submission (4%), (3) provided the choice to either submit electronically or through print (13%), (4) requirement to submit using both methods (4%), (5) the clarification that
candidates should be submitting one file (4%), and (6) directions on who to submit the essay to or information about their schedule for accepting applications (9%).

By far, “Electronic Submission” was the most commonly required method of submission. This code refers to any electronic submission, such as email, attaching e-file to an online form, or composing in an embedded box. The next most common method is giving a choice to the candidate of either submitting electronically or printing and mailing it to the given department. Some institutions also included notes of clarification that candidates were to only submit one file. While the “Submission” requirements did not point towards many important findings, this requirement of one file is interesting and important, as it adds to the finding of various “Genre Names” and possible occluded tensions. The reasoning for only including one file in their submission ranged, and it was interesting that designers chose to include these notes to candidates. One useful example, University of Massachusetts - Boston, used this note to clarify that the (graduate school required) “statement of purpose” could be combined with the departmental “statement of purpose” in “one personal statement,” indicating varying information being available for candidates and an effort to consolidate these requirements.

Furthermore, these “Submission” directions also promote a kind of writing as well. If we look to the example of University of Massachusetts - Boston, these submission requirements indicate that a “statement of purpose” is the same as a “personal statement,” even though these two different prompts do ask for slightly different requirements. For example, while the departmental prompt requests candidates to discuss their “academic experiences (such as selected courses taken, unique projects completed, or interesting skills developed)” [that] demonstrates the applicant's ability to succeed in
graduate-level coursework,” the Graduate Administration (GA) office’s prompt does not include these examples but rather that candidates should discuss “your [their] specific interests, the kind of work you intend to perform, and your goals within the program to which you are applying.” There is a note in the GA office webpage that departmental requirements “supersede” those of the GA office, but the department’s “Submission” directions indicate that these two potentially different genres are the same.

This finding points to one side of the occluded tension involving the “personal.” While some institutions would explicitly separate these genres as being very different, University of Massachusetts - Boston collapses these seemingly different genres into the same genre in their prompt available to candidates, thus indicating widely different notions of a “personal statement” and a “statement of purpose” are being operationalized across institutions. And as noted previously, these findings will be discussed in length later in this text.

**Scaffolding.** There are 31 prompts that feature textual moments of scaffolding. As noted in the “Introduction,” “Scaffolding,” described as an ongoing process between a novice and expert to provide guidance in a task outside the capacity of the novice in much scholarship on this concept, required some reworking for the parameters of this study. “Scaffolding” is operationalized in this study as employing supportive strategies (such as providing explanation, examples, context, resources, etc.) when facets of the assigned task could be outside of the capacity of some candidate populations, like inferring expectations or understanding tacit meanings without access to resources. In Table 3.7, “Scaffolding” subcodes are listed with the number of prompts that subcode appears in. The subcodes are also calculated with their frequency out of the scaffolded prompts (31)
and the number of available prompts (102). Only those subcodes that appear in 10% of prompts using “Scaffolding” are listed in the chart. Although subcodes appearing in less than 10% of prompts are still useful in showing the various ways that prompt designers are working to scaffold candidates, these subcodes have been omitted from Table 3.7 as these subcodes are not commonly employed in these “statement of purpose” prompts, and their definitions can be found in Appendix D.

Table 3.7: Frequencies of “Scaffolding” Subcodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcode</th>
<th>Prompts with Subcode</th>
<th>Frequency of Prompts Using “Scaffolding” ( \frac{n}{31} )</th>
<th>Frequency of Available Prompts ( \frac{n}{102} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic Definition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven different scaffolding moments occur in at least 10%, ranging up to 29%, of the 30% of prompts that include textual moments of scaffolding. “Evaluation,” or information relating to how the text will be evaluated emerges most often in 29% of prompts with textual moments of “Scaffolding.” The second most common subcode is “Examples” (26%). This subcode indicates when the designers decided that a topic might need further scaffolding to understand what the designers might be intending, an effort to be transparent about their tacit knowledge. “Generic Definition” appears in 23% of scaffolded prompts. These textual moments provided information on the purpose/aim of the “statement of purpose,” giving candidates an idea of what purpose they need to write

5 Omitted subcodes include: Contact Department, Process, Graduate School, Reasoning, Evaluative, Explanation, Evolution of Program, MA Only Prompts, Helpful, Coversheet Directions, Qualitative Information, Additional Purpose, Provides Form Sentence, Recommended, Reason for Importance, Applications Specific to Program
with (which can also be used to determine the constructs being assessed through a “statement of purpose”). For instance, the University of Connecticut provides candidates with a couple of textual moments of “scaffolding” that define the genre they are to engage with, detailing that it should provide qualitative evidence that is used in this essay to give “the English Department’s Admissions Committee some idea of the applicant’s writing style, range and depth of ideas, quality of mind, and motivation to embark on an advanced degree program in English and American Literature.” Candidates can then use this information to craft a “statement of purpose” that seeks to accomplish this compositional purpose of demonstrating these constructs. Through this “Generic Definition,” the prompt designers share knowledge with candidates that will be useful in crafting their response to the prompt. And while this inclusion of “generic definition” is useful in understanding what a “statement of purpose” seeks to accomplish for the University of Connecticut, it is important to notice that there is a lack of scaffolding with which to better understand what a construct like “quality of mind” means to the graduate admissions committee.

Used in 19% of these prompts, “Audience” works to provide an idea of who the audience is that candidates are composing for. Occurring in 10% of scaffolded prompts, “Preferences” indicates when the designers make a note to candidates that the admissions committee prefers some format, tone, etc. As demonstrated by University of Oklahoma (Norman Campus), they remind candidates to not “repeat things that [they] will learn from other parts of your application, such as the courses you have taken, but do highlight things you think are particularly important, and do feel free to explain any things in your other materials that you are less proud of.” This preference of University of Oklahoma
(Norman Campus)’s admissions committee explains what they see as an important difference between repeating things that will be understood through other genres and explaining pertinent information, inferring that candidates might use a “statement of purpose” as a space to “explain” to the admissions committee about information that might detract from a candidate’s entire application.

“Resources” also appears in 10% of scaffolded prompts. This is a particularly interesting scaffolding strategy, because of the range of ways this scaffolding is accomplished and the possible opportunity to provide helpful information to candidates writing a “statement of purpose.” While Stony Brook University links candidates to a “statement of purpose” help page from Purdue Owl’s website, George Mason University provides a note to candidates that “The Admissions Committee looks to see whether your goals are compatible with those of your chosen concentration, as evinced both by our descriptive materials and its particular course of study. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the specific requirements of your concentration and, as needed, the career possibilities associated with it.” In this prompt, it is the provision of resource information that gives candidates the opportunity to look to “insider” genres, such as “descriptive materials” for a program or “career possibilities,” that will give candidates the space to write a text that more accurately describes how their “goals are compatible with those of …[their] chosen concentration.” The benefit of providing this scaffolding is two-fold; the candidates have knowledge that is necessary to provide a response that will meet the expectations of committee members, and the committee members have the information they need to make their matriculation decisions.
**Topic Descriptor Tags in “Scaffolding.”** There were eight prompts in which “Examples” were used to scaffold the reader to understanding more about what the designers meant. As noted in Table 3.8, these universities were George Mason University, Indiana University (Purdue University - Indianapolis), Texas A & M University, University of California (Davis), University of Massachusetts (Boston), University of Minnesota (Twin Cities), University of Missouri (Columbia), and Western Michigan University. However, University of Minnesota (Twin Cities)’s scaffolding example leads to explaining an “unfavorable” genre, explaining to candidates what not to do in their “statement of purpose.” The other seven universities use their examples to explain to candidates what should be written about as topics. These examples then serve to provide candidates with examples of what the designers mean by a certain topic. For example, George Mason University writes for candidates to be specific as they discuss their “…prior college-level experience studying English in its various manifestations” (see Table 3.8). In an effort to better explain to candidates what the admissions committee is most interested in by saying “prior college-level experiences studying English in its various manifestations,” examples are particularly useful as this statement could represent a variety of ideas.

As shown in Table 3.8, the textual moments that lead to designers choosing to include examples are organized with the codes associated with these textual moments in column 3. Amongst all these prompts, there are three codes that emerge most commonly: (1) “Preparation,” (2) “Interests,” (3) “Experience.” All of the other codes only appear in one prompt. “Preparation” appears in three prompts (38% of prompts featuring “Examples”), “Interests” also appears in three prompts (38%), and “Experience” occurs
in two prompts (25%). Thus, these concepts (“Preparation” for graduate study and a candidate’s “Interests” and “Experience”) seem to be thought of as concepts that are vague and need further explanation through examples. In regards to this data, it is important to keep in mind that while this subgroup of 8 institutions seems to consider these terms as needing more explanation, this subgroup is still a minority of prompt designers who choose to provide this kind of scaffolding for candidates. To illustrate this minority, 26% of prompts with “scaffolding” had designers who chose to include this scaffolding, and only 8% of all available prompts had this kind of scaffolding.

Table 3.8: Textual Moments Leading to Scaffolded Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Number</th>
<th>Textual Moment Leading to Examples through Scaffolding</th>
<th>Related Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| George Mason University | • “… prior college-level experience studying English in its various manifestations.”  
|                         | • “In other words, insofar as the statement is autobiographical, it should offer a glimpse of your professional goals.” | Experience, Autobiographical                           |
| Indiana University      | • “What has prepared you to do graduate work in English Studies?”                                                        | Preparation                                              |
| (Purdue University - Indianapolis) |                                                                                                                      |                                                         |
| Texas A & M University  | • “We are primarily interested in details about your intellectual interests”  
|                         | • “Details about academic accomplishments…should also be included”                                                    | Interests, Accomplishments                               |
| University of California| • “Please highlight your academic preparation and motivation; interests, specializations and career goals; and fit for pursuing graduate study at UC Davis.” | Preparation, Purpose/Motivation; Interests, Specializations, Goals; Compatibility |
| (Davis)                 |                                                                                                                      |                                                         |
| University of Massachusetts(Boston) | • “A statement that explains academic experiences … demonstrates the applicant's ability to succeed in graduate-level coursework.” | Experiences, Preparation                                |
In order to be transparent about the expectations behind topic description, these prompt designers chose to include examples. The codes used for examples (with the exception of University of Minnesota (Twin Cities)) are included with their frequencies in the following table (Table 3.9). By providing example topics, the minority of prompts, as demonstrated here, seem to promote more contextualized writing from candidates, providing them with examples that reflect an idea of the nuanced meaning of, for example, “interests” (Texas A & M University, University of California (Davis), and University of Missouri (Columbia)). This minority is in contrast to the general trend, with a lack of scaffolding efforts, that seem to promote generic, or nonspecific, writing (discussed more fully in the next section of this chapter).

Table 3.9: Frequencies of Descriptor Tags for “Topic Description” Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor Tag</th>
<th>Number of Prompts</th>
<th>Frequency Amongst Prompts with “Topic Description” Examples $\frac{n}{7}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous Work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility / Fit</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialization / Area of Study (AoS)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^6$ Descriptor tags only appearing in 1 prompt (<15%) have been omitted from the table. These descriptor tags include the following: Publications/Presentations, Influence, Exploration, Reflection, Identities, Understanding of Program Demands, Study Abroad, Purpose behind Area of Study, Accomplishments, Motivation, Interests, Faculty, Ideas, Texts, Modes of Study.
As indicated in Table 3.9, “Previous Work” is the most commonly used example by appearing in 57% of prompts with “Topic Description” examples. With half as many occurrences, “Experience,” “Goals,” “Compatibility / Fit,” “Specialization / Area of Study,” and “Publications / Presentations” each appear in 29% of these prompts. More specifically, “Previous Work” is used by George Mason University, saying, “a writing project, perhaps at work, that spurred your development as a critical rhetorician,” by Indiana University (Purdue University - Indianapolis), “significant research or writing projects,” and University of Massachusetts - Boston, “such as selected courses taken, unique projects completed, or interesting skills developed.” “Experience” was used for “work-related or teaching experience” and “academic and research experiences” (Indiana University (Purdue University - Indianapolis) and University of California (Davis)). University of California (Davis) further provides another list of what is meant by “academic and research experiences.” “Goals” appears as “professional objectives” and “plans for pursuing them ['ideas, texts, and modes of study that inspire’ the candidate]” (University of California (Davis) and Western Michigan University). “Compatibility / Fit” appears in George Mason University’s prompt as “goals are compatible with those of your chosen concentration, as evinced both by our descriptive materials and its particular course of study” and in University of California (Davis)’s prompt as “how your preparation, experiences, and interests match the specific resources and characteristics of your graduate program….” “Specialization / Area of Study” appear similarly as “what he or she would like to study and why” and “disciplinary subfields, area/s of specialization” (Texas A & M University; University of California (Davis)).
These scaffolded concepts and the examples that assist in these explanations also work towards promoting texts that are aimed to accomplish effectively informing their audience of tacit meanings and the textual purpose of providing information that is crucial in matriculation decisions. By not only telling candidates to describe their preparation for rigorous study, but by further providing them with examples of what is meant by “preparation for rigorous study,” the designers are providing candidates with a clearer understanding of what will assist evaluators in making matriculation decisions. As noted previously, scaffolding works to provide necessary information to responding to a “statement of purpose” prompt in a way that will put them in a position to meet those expectations, which overall, are occluded. And as a result, the “statements of purpose” will provide information that is necessary for committee members to make matriculation decisions. However, as shown by Figure 3.4, “scaffolding” is not common among the majority of “statement of purpose” prompts.

Figure 3.4: Relative Scarcity of “Scaffolding”

In Figure 3.4, “Scaffold,” Source Web URL, and “Topic Description” were calculated to determine what patterns might be evident. Most “statement of purpose”
prompts are housed in webpages associated with an institution’s English Department\(^7\) (85%). The other prompts appear in graduate administrative offices (15%). While it is interesting to note that English Departments seem to have more instances of scaffolding, this might be accounted for by the opportunity to write a prompt to a smaller scope of candidates, creating an opportunity to provide specific requirements. However, what is most important in Figure 3.4 is the overall lack of scaffolding in “statement of purpose” prompts no matter where the prompt is sourced; only 29% of the 108 universities researched contain textual moments of “Scaffolding.”

**Summary of Question 2**

In response to my second research question, there appears to be a consensus amongst prompt designers that “Goals,” “Interests,” and “Purpose” are the topics of a “statement of purpose.” These topics then promote texts discussing the goals, interests, and purposes of the candidates. Further, there appears to be a strong emphasis on “length” requirements by the majority of prompt designers, promoting length-driven texts. In respect to “Genre Name,” there appears to be a variety of names used to describe this genre, and while there are a variety of names used, “statement of purpose” is the most commonly used genre name. While this data explains the common conventions of this genre and what kinds of writing seem to be promoted, one of the most interesting findings is the lack of scaffolding in prompts for “statements of purpose.” What we might take into the next section of this text is that the various differences connected to genre names, such as assumed genre conventions, differences in required topics and lack of

\(^7\) “English Department” sourced prompts includes two universities in which the prompt is sourced in another academic department (e.g. College of Liberal Arts & Sciences).
scaffolding, might also indicate that there are possible occluded tensions and assumptions
that might hinder the performance of candidates in their “statement of purpose.”

**A Tacit Knowledge: Uncovering Tensions and Assumptions**

**Source of Prompts**

Relationships were drawn between four coded data points: (1) Scaffolding, (2) Prompt Source Web URL, (3) Topic Description, and (4) Genre Name. In Figure 3.5, “Genre Name,” Topic Description,” and “Source Web URL” are compared. This figure works to show (1) what “Genre Name” is most commonly used by English and graduate administrative offices and (2) how often each “Genre Name” includes “Topic Descriptions” by the department or office it is sourced from. “Statement of Purpose” is the most commonly used genre name for this text, and to give candidates an idea of what topics are required, 82% of these prompts sourced from English departments include topic descriptions, whereas 71% of “statement of purpose” prompts sourced from graduate administrative offices include topic descriptions. This data indicates that there is a relative importance for informing candidates on what topics to discuss in their “statement of purpose.”
The following table (Table 3.10) lists the percentages of prompts that include topic descriptions by departments. “Names Dependent on Specialization” is excluded from this table, as there is only one prompt in this genre name and it does not include any topic descriptions. As shown here, overall more prompts sourced from the English department include topic descriptions, and 100% of genre names associated with “Goals/Objectives” and “Letters” have topic descriptions (source – English), and in comparison, “statement of purpose” prompts sourced from English departments only have an 83% topic description rate. This data in Table 3.10 might suggest that while topic descriptions are important to prompt designers, particular genre names might signal to some prompt designers that more information is necessary while other prompt designers might assume that candidates have knowledge of what topics are required by the given genre name. For example, for prompt designers in English departments, a “Letter” needs more context through topic descriptions than a “Statement of Purpose” or “Personal
“Goals/Objectives” require more context that other genres.

Table 3.10: Frequency of Prompts with “Topic Descriptions” by Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Name</th>
<th>Percentage of Prompts with Topic Descriptions (Source – English)</th>
<th>Percentage of Prompts with Topic Descriptions (Source – GA Offices)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Statement</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals/Objectives</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Names</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This difference could indicate a possible tension between genre names and sources of prompts, as it appears that required topic descriptions are assumed knowledge in many cases, when a genre name might not be enough information for candidates to know what is expected of them. However, it is most notable that English departments generally provide more prompts with topic descriptions, and it can be inferred that this overall higher instance of providing topic descriptions might be influenced by the more specific audience of candidates responding to English department prompts versus the larger scope of candidates responding to prompts designed by and sourced in GA Offices.

With varying scopes of audiences, such as those only applying to degrees in English departments and those applying to graduate degree programs, it is possible that English departments (as the designers and future evaluators of these “statements of purpose”) could design a prompt informing candidates on the topics that will help them make their matriculation decisions. For Graduate Administrative Offices, who may or may not end up evaluating the “statements of purpose,” designers from these offices may not find it possible to design a prompt that will be specific to all departments evaluating these “statements of purpose,” and thus design a prompt that is ambiguous in what it wants candidates to do in response.
In Figure 3.6, “Genre Name,” “Scaffolding,” and “Source Web URL” are compared. Data is laid out to show (1) what “Genre Name” is most commonly used by English and graduate administrative offices and (2) how often each “Genre Name” is scaffolded by the department/office it is sourced from. 28% of English department sourced statement of purpose prompts are scaffolded, and 43% of prompts sourced from graduate administrative offices are scaffolded. Table 3.11 lists all percentages of prompts that are scaffolded by departments/offices.

Figure 3.6: Relationship Between: “Genre Name,” “Scaffolding,” and “Source Web URL”

We might take away from Figure 3.6 and Figure 3.4, that there is an overall lack of scaffolding amongst prompts, no matter where it is sourced. As we look at this data in Table 3.11, while some genre names (like “statement of purpose”) have 50% of prompts using scaffolding depending on where it is sourced (like Graduate Admissions Offices), this percentage also reflects that half of these prompts do not include scaffolding for
candidates in understanding what is meant by the designers. Further, if these numbers are not separated depending on where the prompt is sourced from, no genre names have more than 38% of its prompts scaffolded for candidates. In comparison to the amount of prompts that include topic descriptions (see Figure 3.5 and Table 3.10), while 82% of English sourced statement of purpose prompts include topic descriptions, only 28% include scaffolding.

Table 3.11: Frequency of Scaffolded Prompts by Source and “Genre Name”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Name</th>
<th>Percentage of Scaffolded Prompts (Source – “English”)</th>
<th>Percentage of Scaffolded Prompts (Source – “GA Offices”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Statement</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals/Objectives</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Names</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings suggest that it is uncommon practice for prompt designers to write prompts that are specifically scaffolded for candidates writing to them. Furthermore, while topic descriptions are a crucial part of a “statement of purpose” prompt, formatting or style requirements, especially length, is equally important to including some description of the topics to be discussed. As I move on to the “Discussion,” these findings will be discussed in more length.

The Inclusion of the “Personal”

While there seems to be more consensus than contention surrounding the “topic descriptions” required in “statements of purpose,” there is a tension in regards to the inclusion of the “personal.” This tension seems to emerge in one sense with the “Genre Name” attributed to this genre. While the most common “Genre Name” used is “statement of purpose,” the next most common name is the category of names that relate
to “personal,” such as “personal statement.” Although a difference in “Genre Name” might seem to be inconsequential, there seems to be more evidence of this tension in the “scaffolding” moments in these prompts.

Characterized most commonly with the “Scaffolding” subcode of “Generic Definition” (and once as “Example”), these moments seek to scaffold candidates to understand what the admissions committee expects or does not expect from the genre. “Personal” is meant here as a way to note that content that references the candidates’ past or experiences in a way that might be considered “narrative.” This definition is derived by the examples drawn from the corpus of universities noting the difference between a text that is inclusive of the “personal” verses those that “exclude” this aspect of the candidates’ experiences. While there are seven prompts that set out to define the genre, only five discuss the “personal.” Table 3.12 provides examples of how these universities describe the “personal.”

Table 3.12: Tensions Surrounding the “Personal”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Genre Name</th>
<th>Example of Tension about the “Personal”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southern Illinois University</td>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>“However, the Graduate Studies Committee recommends that in the statement of purpose you detail only those personal qualities or biographical events that have a direct bearing on your intellectual and creative interests. In short, we recommend that you not construe the statement of purpose as primarily a “personal statement.””</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Carbondale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Minnesota</td>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>“PhD and MA applicants should avoid making the statement of purpose a personal statement weighed down with autobiographical anecdotes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Twin Cities)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Dakota</td>
<td>Statement of Goals</td>
<td>“The School of Graduate Studies defines a complete application as one that contains a statement of purpose (this is the same as the personal statement; you do not need both)…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia (Main Campus)</td>
<td>Statement of Academic Interests</td>
<td>“Statement of Academic Interests (called the &quot;Personal Statement&quot; in the on-line application form).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee)</td>
<td>Personal Statement</td>
<td>“This can be the same as the “Reasons Statement” you submit to the Graduate School. Even though it is called a “Personal Statement,” it should be a substantive outline of your research interests, qualifications, and plans for graduate study.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen with these five examples, some institutions consider a “Personal Statement” to be the same (or even similar enough genres) to relate the two “Genre Names” (see University of North Dakota, University of Virginia - Main Campus, and University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee). Southern Illinois University (Carbondale) and University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) consider these genres as separate in their “permitted” content, drawing lines for candidates, so they will not “construe” the two texts as being one and the same and to “avoid” those conventions of a “personal statement,” such as “personal anecdotes.” Interestingly, “Personal Statement” prompts do not advocate for the inclusion of the “personal” or define what is meant by “personal” in its “Genre Name.” However, the one “Personal Statement” prompt that provides a “Generic Definition” does something interesting with this textual moment of “Scaffolding.” Rather than only discussing the inclusion of the “personal,” the designers choose to hedge what is meant by “personal,” noting that “personal” in this prompt should not detract from a focus on the candidates’ “research interests, qualifications, and plans for graduate study.” By providing this description of what is meant by “personal,” the designers do not appear to assume that this knowledge is tacit for candidates but acknowledge that “personal” can carry many meanings.
As candidates encounter “statement of purpose” prompts, they might not see the tension underlying the word choices of prompt designers, especially as candidates might only encounter one or two prompts in their application process, not being in a position to have a “tacit knowledge” underlying the admissions committees’ choice of a “Genre Name” or the word choices within the prompt. These tensions and assumptions are discussed in more depth in the following “Discussion.”
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

Overview

As discussed in my “Findings,” candidates for graduate study in US English programs are required to submit a number of genres, commonly between five or eight different genres. These 5-8 genres do range depending on the program. 100% of researched universities require GPA/Transcripts, and at least 88% of universities require all of the following texts: Transcripts/GPA, Letters of Recommendation, “Statements of Purpose,” Writing Samples, and GRE General Test Scores. As 88% of universities require these same genres to be submitted for matriculation decisions, the current canon of graduate English matriculation examination texts undeniably consists of these five genres. This means that these genres constitute a constellation in which each of these genres is engaged with in the context of these other genres. As admissions committee members read each genre, their reading is influenced by the context of the other required genres; a reading of (for instance) a “statement of purpose” is influenced by the candidate’s other application genres, such as their writing samples. Conversely, a reading of the candidate’s writing sample will be influenced by their “statement of purpose.” The same is true for candidates as they compose a “statement of purpose” or prepare any of their application genres. Each text is prepared under the context of their other genres.

This project is most interested in the genre of the “Statement of Purpose,” as it is the best site to study for this project, which is interested in the matriculation genre that allows communication between candidates and the admissions committee. The “statement of purpose” is most interesting to me, because it is the only genre that is
written by the candidates with the admissions committee as the audience, signifying an opportunity to address the evaluators. As noted in my “Methods” section, genres like “Transcripts/GPA” and “Writing Samples” are embedded in related, yet different, activity systems for purposes and audiences that vary from those of matriculation at a particular institution. To add to the intrigue of this genre, some institutions also make note of this text’s importance in their prompts. Indiana University (Bloomington) ranks the “statement of purpose” as “[m]ore significant than scores and grades…” yet maybe not as significant as a “writing sample.” University of Connecticut makes a point to note that “[t]he committee wants to know those things about you which cannot be expressed quantitatively,” instead indicating that a “statement of purpose” provides qualitative evidence. As noted by University of Massachusetts (Amherst), “We place great weight on your personal statement. This statement is your opportunity to articulate your interests and get the committee interested in you, in your potential as a professional, and as a human being.”

Although there are not many institutions that describe the importance of the “statement of purpose,” the few (3%) that do seem to indicate that this genre gives the student the opportunity to provide the admissions committee with an idea of who the candidate is, that they are a complex human being with multiple identities who cannot be understood with scores and grades alone, indicating that the “statement of purpose” works to accomplish something that the other genres in this constellation of matriculation genres might not be able to accomplish without the “statement of purpose.” This sentiment is further reflected in a help page on the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab) webpage, a resource that Stony Brook University links candidates to in their prompt.
Purdue’s online writing lab hosts a page that notes that the

…graduate statement of purpose is one of the most important documents in your application packet. A good statement of purpose may not necessarily get you in to a program, but a poorly written one could cause the committee to overlook your application…. [further warning candidates to r]emember that your statement of purpose is the only opportunity you will have to let the admission committee directly get to know you. They will have some sense of who you are based on your recommenders’ notes and on the writing sample you include, but this is the chance for you to personally make a good, strong impression. (Sanchez, 2010)

Sanchez’s comments mirror those of the prompt designers from Indiana University (Bloomington), University of Connecticut, and University of Massachusetts (Amherst), reflecting the notion that a “statement of purpose” is an opportunity for a candidate to address the evaluators on their own behalf to explain who they are or to explain or contextualize other parts of their application, such as low grades, scores, or writing samples.

As Sanchez notes on Purdue’s OWL page, the “statement of purpose” is a high stakes document for matriculation decisions, noting that it is the “only opportunity” a candidate will have to address the admissions committee in an attempt to let them “directly get to know you,” and comment on your “potential as a professional and as a human being” (Sanchez, 2010; University of Massachusetts (Amherst)). If we refer back to our discussion of activity systems from the “Introduction,” the direction of the activity is mediated through the tools of the activity system. As candidates are newcomers to the
activity system, they are encountering a prompt (a tool) with which to use as a guide in composing a “statement of purpose,” another tool used by the admissions committee in their matriculation decision. While the “statement of purpose” is a text the admissions committee will use to understand (with the use of other matriculation genres) whether the candidate matches their tacitly understood constructs (i.e. “ability to succeed in graduate-level coursework” (University of Massachusetts – Boston)), the “statement of purpose” prompt is a writing or assignment prompt that the graduate admissions committee designs to prompt candidates to craft a “statement of purpose” that will aid committee members in making an admissions decision.

In engagement with these new genres, the candidate will further encounter a potentially unfamiliar discourse with rules and customs and histories that are specific to that activity system. Candidates may be aware of some rules and customs, but many might not have a understanding of the occluded knowledge that could be useful in construction of their “statement of purpose.” With encountering an unfamiliar discourse and genres of the new activity system, the prompt genre can be a useful tool to candidates in negotiating the assumptions and tacit knowledge that would inform a candidate on making strategic moves when designing their “statement of purpose” that will put her/him in a position to demonstrate the desired constructs of the graduate admissions committee, such as having “potential” or “promise,” or being a “good fit,” however these constructs might be defined by the graduate admissions committees.

One could speculate that the graduate admissions committee would be invested in designing a prompt that aids candidates in, for instance, understanding the expectations and knowledge about the program that would inform candidates on whether s/he would
be a “good fit” in the program, what the program’s expectations are of matriculated candidates, and/or context-specific meanings that aid candidates in understanding the difference in scholarly approaches being taken up by faculty that influence the curriculum and conversations they will encounter. And while all of this might not be achieved within the space of a writing prompt, a prompt can be used as a space to point candidates to resources that might help them respond to a prompt like that of the University of Pittsburg, which asks candidates to “highlight your sense of direction and some of the field conversations that you might be entering.”

This overview will help contextualize the remainder of this “Discussion” which will be broken up into sections, tailored to separate stakeholders. As the overview addresses the apparent importance of the “statement of purpose” genre, this assumed importance and discussion of candidates entering a new activity system without the necessary knowledge will be useful to understanding these following sections. While these sections are separated, a reader might benefit most by reading all of the following sections to gain a more complete knowledge of the implications of this research and the different stakeholders that are affected and to be considered in matriculation and research on matriculation genres.

**Candidates for Graduate Studies in English**

As candidates prepare genres that will demonstrate that they are a “good fit” with the program and that they have the potential to be “promising” graduate students, they will encounter rules of these genres, especially as some of the rules of the “statement of purpose,” an unfamiliar genre, are very clearly stated in the prompt, if one is accessible. With 82% of prompts providing candidates with some directions on the format or style of
this text, it seems to be a priority amongst prompt designers. 88% of these “Format/Style” requirements are directions on the length of the text. A clear rule for candidates to abide by in a majority of prompts, this space limitation might not facilitate a candidate’s attempt at responding to a program’s prompt.

Topic descriptions indicate another rule of this genre: to discuss those topics of interest to the admissions committee. “Goals,” “Interests,” and “Purpose,” are the most commonly required topics, being used in at least 48% of prompts providing topic descriptions. These topics can be used similarly to ask candidates to talk about the reasons that candidates want to study at the graduate school. These top codes reveal a consensus amongst universities on the content of this genre. This content might prove useful as the “statement of purpose” would ideally reveal whether a candidate and her/his goals are potentially a “good fit” with those goals and resources of the program, assisting admissions committee members in selecting candidates who would benefit from the program’s resources.

While these words’ meanings might overlap (writing about one’s “goals” can overlap with a discussion of their “purpose” for attending grad school, and “goals” are certainly an “interest” one would like to pursue), there are nine institutions which use these three terms in their prompts together, indicating that while these terms are very similar, they are also very different depending on the program and who is involved in designing the prompt. The use of these topic descriptions can be illustrated through the following two extended examples of Washington State University and the University of Akron. Washington State University’s prompt states:
Brief independent statement. The applicant should send a description of his or her interests in English studies, along with reasons for wishing to begin (or continue) graduate work, foreign language competence, background or experience in teaching, career goals, and expectations regarding WSU. This statement should be no longer than about 500 words (two double-spaced pages). Send the statement directly to the WSU Graduate School. (Washington State University)

In this prompt, Washington State University uses “goals,” “interests,” and “purpose” to discuss slightly different topics. “Interests” is used in context with English studies, “purpose” is used as “reasons” behind beginning or continuing on into graduate work, and “goals” is used to request a discussion of candidates’ future careers. And even though it is evident that Washington State University uses “goals,” “interests,” and “purpose” in different ways, the use of these terms might still be more complex than they appear in this prompt. “Interests” might carry the assumption that candidates should discuss research interests or career interests, for instance, or could assume that candidates should discuss particular literary works they are interested in.

The implications that could follow might position a candidate as not impressive or characterized as unprepared. To keep with the example of WSU, a WSU candidate might compose a response to WSU’s prompt with a discussion of her/his interests in studying American Literature, and because the candidate did not draw from particular literary works, s/he might compose a response that does not match a response that is expected by evaluators that demonstrates her/his “preparedness” and “fit.” If the candidate’s work fails to demonstrate their “potential” or prove her/him to be a “promising” graduate student, their lack of knowledge of the difference between these topics or the tacit
expectations of how to address these topics could possibly lead to the candidate being overlooked by evaluators in lieu of candidates who composed a response with a discussion of particular literary works.

The prompt designers and admission committee members (like those of Washington State University) are insiders to this discourse and might have a sense of how these nuanced differences in word choice reflect their expectations of what a candidate “should” write about. They are insiders as initiated scholars of “English studies” and in the department as faculty members, indicating a privilege that influences the choices made in their prompt for a “statement of purpose.” In another example, University of South Florida (Tampa) provides this prompt for candidates, “A two-to-three page statement, double-spaced, describing the student's background, purpose for attending graduate school, and career goals….” In this prompt, “background” could infer a range of interpretations. And while the designers have expectations behind this word, maybe even conversations occurred about what they expect from a candidate’s response to this prompt, many candidates might lack a knowledge that will position her/him to interpret what the evaluators are looking for by “background” or “interests in English studies.” Other candidates who might have this tacit knowledge (even without the awareness of this knowledge) will be in a better position to write a text that will earn a favorable decision by meeting the implicit expectations. In other words, even with contextual clues like Washington State University’s “English studies” or “career,” these topics are still ambiguous and can lead to disadvantaging some populations of candidates, who don’t have this knowledge, while privileging other candidates who have access to this knowledge. This difference might signal to admissions committee members that
those candidates without the tacit knowledge may not be a “good fit” with their program, and this generic purpose might be helpful to admissions committees, as it differentiates who will fit in with their program, and who might not. However, this false negative might also cause candidates who might be a “good fit” with the program to be overlooked, costing the program other “promising” candidates that might not have the same accessibility to shared knowledge that privileged candidates might have.

While it might seem like lacking this tacit knowledge puts the candidate in an inescapable position, there are other resources that might provide some insight into the discursive choices used by prompt designers that candidates might not be aware of as they prepare their applications, and having access to these resources as they compose and prepare genres might have an influence on the decision made on their application. To help uncover some of this unshared knowledge, candidates might benefit from looking at other resources of information, such as “Mission Statements,” “Program Descriptions,” “Letters from the Dean,” sections of the “Student Handbook,” etc. to gain some understanding of the discourse being used in this institution. These texts might help to dissolve some of the hidden knowledge and expectations.

In another extended example, the prompt designers write the following in the “statement of purpose” prompt by the University of Akron (Main Campus): “Statement of purpose. Please send a 1-2 page Statement of Background and Goals to the English Department ….” This prompt seems to refer to this genre as both a “Statement of purpose” and “Statement of Background and Goals,” which this latter genre name indicates that candidates should discuss their “Background and Goals.” There are no other contextual clues regarding what is meant by “Background” or “Goals,” and a
candidate might not have a knowledge of what the admissions committee expects a candidate to write about in regards to these topics. However, there are other resources that might be useful in giving some context of what might be meant here. In University of Akron (Main Campus)’s description of the “Graduate Program in English,” the designers write “…Our programs enroll approximately 80-90 students, many of whom are nontraditional in their academic, social, and cultural backgrounds” (‘About the Programs,” 2016). This note about “backgrounds” in their description works to give candidates an idea of what might be meant by “Background” in the prompt. University of Akron (Main Campus) seems to be interested in the candidate’s “academic, social, and cultural background.” And while this specification is helpful, there might be more questions that candidates need answered as they prepare their matriculation genres. What aspects of these histories should they discuss? What is most important for admissions committees to know in their selection of candidates to matriculate into their programs?

University of Akron (Main Campus) does provide a webpage that showcases some of the current students in the program, and should the candidate be aware of this resource, this webpage might be extremely helpful to candidates in their compositional choices in crafting their “statement of purpose.” This webpage provides current graduate students with a space to answer questions about their experiences in the program (i.e. “Would you recommend working full-time and attending graduate classes at night to anyone?”), their interests (i.e. “Why is it important to look at video games as literary texts?”), and their “backgrounds” (i.e. “What are some main differences between universities in the United States and the university where you graduated from in Tunisia?”) (“Student Spotlight,” 2016). Studying this webpage provides additional
insight in how to read the University of Akron’s “statement of purpose” prompt. A candidate might then understand “Background” to be those experiences (whether they be inclusive of academic, cultural, and/or social aspects) that help to describe aspects like their scholarly interests or different knowledge that sets them apart and would add to the diversity of the program.

While their resources are a way for candidates to navigate some of these occluded assumptions and tensions in composition of a “statement of purpose,” it won’t dissolve all of the assumptions (i.e. contextual meanings), expectations, or share all knowledge that might be necessary. These resources are not a solve-all for this assumption of shared knowledge. For example, there were few resources that might help a candidate navigate what might be meant by University of Akron (Main Campus) in their use of “goals.” Furthermore, it might not always be evident to candidates that there might be resources that could be useful or what resources might be most useful in navigating how to understand a prompt that has unshared knowledge that the candidate might not have access to. Reading a prompt very carefully, allowing a candidate to inquire on meanings or what might be missing from the prompt that would help her/him understand more about what the admissions committee expects from candidates to their programs can be useful in understanding how to compose a “statement of purpose.” However, no matter how proactive a candidate might try to be in preparation of a “statement of purpose,” more scaffolding from prompt designers could prove to be most useful in providing transparent expectations and helpful context that create a space where candidates might be in a position to compose a prompt that might lead to a matriculation decision that
reflects their “potential” and “goodness of fit” as a graduate student for a particular program.

With some further scaffolding on what is essentially a writing prompt or an assignment prompt, candidates might then be able to better negotiate the unstated assumptions behind these prompts and be in a better position to construct a text that will more accurately reflect their potential as a graduate student and the message they want to convey to the admissions committee. A lack of scaffolding leads to ambiguous prompts that expect candidates to have a understanding of unstated, implicit assumptions.

Through this study, I have gained the privilege of being in a position to see some of the unstated assumptions, ambiguousness, and underlying tensions in these prompts by analyzing such a comprehensive corpus. A candidate only seeing and responding to a few prompts might not have access to this knowledge that “educational experiences” might not carry the same meaning between institutions, and the lack of this tacit knowledge can be potentially exclusionary of some populations of candidates. I can’t pretend, now an insider to this information, that I knew in my senior year of my undergraduate program that there were university resources that might have put me in a better position to write a “statement of purpose,” because the evidence is clear now that there were inherent assumptions and tensions that were invisible to me.

Reflecting on my lack of this tacit knowledge back when I applied to the University of Maine elucidates the need for scaffolding in prompts, especially in the way of providing sources to candidates. However, explicit “scaffolding” in prompts, while a proactive way to build equal ground for all populations of candidates to demonstrate their “potential” or that they have or meet the construct being assessed, can only do so much in
the way of offsetting the kinds of messages that candidates draw from that misconstrue the conventions of the “statement of purpose” genre. As I did, candidates can draw from online forums, help pages, movies, examples from colleagues, or advice from a professor, which can provide contradictory advice that muddles the image of the kind of text they are expected to produce. To prepare candidates for the kind of work they will be expected to do in varying contexts with unfamiliar and unclear genres (such as in an application to a graduate program), scholars need more robust training in RGS. As shown in the extended examples above, an understanding of rhetorical genre studies would assist candidates in decoding the tacit assumptions in prompts. As demonstrated through the previous example, while resources might be available that can be used to decode these tacit assumptions, a candidate might not know they are available or how to access them. A candidate with a robust RGS background would be in a better position to negotiate what might be expected or implied in the prompt or have previous genre knowledge to assist her/him in inferring how to proceed with the unfamiliar genre (see Bawarshi & Reiff, 2011; Beaufort, 1999; Boone et al., 2012; Fishman and Reiff, 2011; McCarthy, 1987/2014; Rounsaville, 2012), especially if the prompt is not transparent about expectations or provides enough context within the prompt; this candidate might then have the knowledge that other available genres might provide the context or knowledge s/he is missing and could search these other genres out and analyze them in order to craft a response to a potentially ambiguous prompt, more successful in demonstrating whether s/he meets the tacitly assessed constructs.
**Graduate Admissions Committees**

As noted previously the Findings, a “statements of purpose” tends to be between 1 and 2 pages in length. Admissions committees are required to read many admissions texts and to carefully consider each candidate’s application. Thus, it is expected that many faculty members would include length requirements to help manage this task. While length requirements do correspond to a writing sample requirement, indicating an alternative space for candidates to provide samples of their “writing abilities,” a writing sample seems to accomplish a different purpose than that of a “statement of purpose.” And although these length requirements might help manage the task of reading these texts, it is valuable for prompt designers to consider that putting such an emphasis on “length” may detract from the real purposes that candidates are being expected to take on (e.g. discussing their “goodness of fit,” their “goals,” or to demonstrate their complexity as scholars not only being able to be defined by scores and grades).

Similar to the importance of “length,” topic descriptions also emerged as important to prompt designers, and while these prompts say much of the same thing and/or use the same words, they do not carry the same meaning. Unfortunately, there is an overall lack of scaffolding amongst coded prompts. Amongst all available “statement of purpose” prompts, only 30% include textual moments that scaffold. An assumption that knowledge is shared is a pattern that seems to emerge amongst the topic descriptions required of candidates. For example, like the example of University of Akron (Main Campus) in the previous section, a candidate might read Washington State University’s prompt, which requests candidates to write about “background or experience in teaching.” The contextual clue “in teaching” gives the candidate a sense that it is the
experiences and background related to teaching that are most interesting to evaluators, but candidates might struggle over the range of decisions that emerge with this phrase. They might choose to include more personal background or experiences that relate to their theoretical framework on teaching (such as an educational difficulty that influenced their choice in becoming interested in teaching). Or they may feel that they should keep their text in reflection of professional development in education, such as work experiences. Still, they may wonder if they should discuss scholars they draw from and use this scholarship to contextualize their discussion of her/his background or experience in teaching, and more scaffolding would be helpful in giving candidates context to make compositional choices in response to these prompts.

It might be a useful approach to consider “statement of purpose” prompts for what they are: writing or assignment prompts. As candidates prepare an application for admission, a “statement of purpose” prompt is the first writing prompt they will be responding to, and if these prompts are treated as writing prompts, prompt designers might then create prompts that are constructed to be transparent with expectations and put forth an effort to share knowledge that will be useful to candidates in their responses to these prompts. The potential lack of scaffolding towards tacit knowledge is further demonstrated by Eaton (2009), as she points out knowledge to graduate candidates of Technical Communication programs that admissions committees and prompt designers might assume is “common knowledge,” such as avoiding any discussion of income or “higher pay” or that is it “appropriate to mention faculty members by name” (p. 165). As writing prompts that we, as instructors and thus prompt designers, construct for the scholars in our classrooms require us to provide helpful context for what tasks candidates
are expected to take up in response, prompt designers are as well tasked with preparing “statement of purpose” prompts with the same attention and explicitness in scaffolding. As shown through Miller et al.’s (2016) findings, history students had difficulty producing the expected genre, not because they were incapable of writing an “argument” but rather because of the lack of explicit transparency of expectations in the prompt and the required source text. Without such scaffolding, how can candidates be expected to respond with a text that provides graduate admissions committees with the information they require to make informed matriculation decisions.

As noted in my previous section situated for candidates, through the researching and analyzing of these prompts, I have that knowledge now that allows me to see the lack of shared knowledge in these prompts. I know as I read Georgia State University’s prompt: “Statement of Purpose: Please submit a one-page statement of your educational and career goals” that there are assumptions underlying these topics that are invisible to candidates. As with McCarthy’s (1987/2014) study, described in the “Introduction,” Dave felt like a stranger in a new land as he entered each new class and was asked to write in new genres, and I speculate that invisible assumptions and expectations ended up hindering Dave as he composed an unfamiliar genre (“poem explication”) for his Poetry class. While Dave succeeded in some genres from Freshman Composition and Biology, he struggled in writing in this similar yet still unfamiliar genre for Poetry. Like Dave, candidates are also being asked to enter new activity systems and compose unfamiliar texts with occluded assumptions and expectations, which end up posing possible hindrances to their preparation of matriculation genres.
The discourse and genre were new to Dave, and there were some unstated assumptions underlying the work in his Poetry class, such as the difference between composing a summary and taking on an interpretative approach, which was tacit knowledge for the professor. And while McCarthy’s reader is not provided with the Poetry instructor’s writing prompt or sample texts, one might speculate that a lack of explicit scaffolding of the sort that has been recommended here to understand what was tacit for the professor, could have contributed to Dave unsuccessfully using the genre of poem explication, especially in light of McCarthy’s “Discussion.” McCarthy notes here that this “study suggests that writing development is, in part, context-dependent. In each new classroom community, Dave in many ways resembled a beginning language user” (p. 257) and recommends that instructors use assignments and instructional supports to assist newcomers to using the language of the community they are entering (p. 258). As Dave entered new activity systems, he faced unfamiliar genres and had difficulty transferring his genre knowledge from Freshman Composition to understand his necessary engagement with the unfamiliar genres in Poetry. As context is necessary for writing development, context is also necessary with composing in new situations in which transference of skill is required, such as the experience of a candidate applying for admission into a graduate program.

Again, while it might be a positive result to differentiate between candidates who have this tacit knowledge and those who lack it, this differentiation might result in false negatives and overlooking candidates who might demonstrate “goodness of fit” and have “potential” as a graduate student if scaffolding provided more shared knowledge to contextualize the prompt. Furthermore, this differentiation might point more towards
candidates who have a tacit knowledge of how to best apply to graduate applications, and this knowledge is not necessarily a proxy measure for how well a candidate might do in graduate studies. While I can now see the ambiguousness of these “statement of purpose” prompts, I can also clearly see a tension in this genre between the inclusion of the “personal,” possibly leading to assumptions that candidates should have a “shared knowledge” of what is appropriately “personal” verses what is unwelcomed or is not “professional.”

While “Personal Statement” is the second most commonly used genre name for a “statement of purpose,” there is a lot of misalignment in regards to the difference or similarity between a “Personal Statement” and a “Statement of Purpose.” University of North Dakota, University of Virginia (Main Campus), and University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee) support a “Personal Statement” being the same genre as a “Statement of Purpose,” a “Statement of Academic Interests” and a “Reasons Statement.” To University of North Dakota, the graduate school’s required “statement of purpose” is defined as the same as the departmental required “personal statement,” and while the prompt on the graduate school’s webpage refers to this genre as a “Goals Statement,” we can infer that the English department might further say that a “goals statement” is the same as a “personal statement” as well. While there are universities that note these genres are the same with varying genre names, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale) and University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) oppose this idea. Southern Illinois University (Carbondale) requests a “statement of purpose” with their applications and notes that candidates wanting to be considered for fellowships need to submit a separate personal/biographical statement, further noting
however, the Graduate Studies Committee recommends that in the statement of purpose you detail only those personal qualities or biographical events that have a direct bearing on your intellectual and creative interests. In short, we recommend that you not construe the statement of purpose as primarily a “personal statement.”

This statement at the end of their prompt indicates to candidates that while a “statement of purpose” might include relevant personal qualities or biographical events, it is not “primarily a personal statement,” indicating that a “personal statement” is different than a “statement of purpose.” And while there is a place for fellowship applicants to include more of their personal biographical information, there is a limitation on this information in one’s “statement of purpose.”

University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) also makes it clear to applicants that a “statement of purpose” is different than a “personal statement.” They write: “PhD and MA applicants should avoid making the statement of purpose a personal statement weighed down with autobiographical anecdotes.” This note in the prompt not only defines a “statement of purpose” as what it is not (a “personal statement”) but gives some kind of definition for what a “personal statement” is by characterizing this text as being “weighed down with autobiographical anecdotes.” While this tension between the use of genre names and their possible impact on candidates when we look closely at a number of institutions, we can speculate that a candidate applying to one or two programs may not be aware of the inherent assumptions and invisible tensions. This tension is discussed in Brown’s (2004) article on “personal statements,” in which he claims that despite the title of the genre, successful candidates into Psychology programs discuss their “identities
as apprentice scientists” (p. 259). Brown’s findings further demonstrate that, while the
genre name might indicate that “personal” anecdotes or narrative elements are
encouraged, the expectations might not match the genre name used. Furthermore, while
Brown’s findings reflect one psychology department, his findings support my own
speculations about different genre names supporting potentially very different genre
features. I am not advocating that a “statement of purpose” should only go by one genre
name, but rather that there needs to be more scaffolding on the decision of a genre name
being made, so that candidates can make informed compositional decisions in their
responses to prompts. With more scaffolding (such as that provided in some writing
prompts mentioned in this study and in Eaton’s (2009) article), a space might then be
created in which candidates can write a text that situates her/him in a better position to
compose a text that accomplishes the generic purpose in a favorable way.

One university that seems to be explicit in the scaffolding they provide to students
is George Mason University. While I do not want to characterize this prompt as “perfect”
or “the standard,” I think that this university’s prompt designers are careful in their
preparation of this prompt by providing useful textual moments that scaffold the
candidate in their response. It is not to say that all prompts should take the form of this
one, but rather that this prompt is a useful model for thinking about scaffolding. Referred
to as a “Goals Statement,” the designers write the following:
Figure 4.1: Screenshot of George Mason University’s “Statement of Purpose” Prompt

**About the Goals Statement**

The purpose of the goals statement is to introduce yourself to the department as a thinker, a scholar, a teacher, a writer. The Admissions Committee is looking to assess your preparedness for rigorous graduate study: to that end, you should strive to be as specific as you can about your prior college-level experience studying English in its various manifestations. You might, for instance, talk about a particular course and approach that influenced your decision to pursue an advanced degree; an interpretive problem or theoretical model you encountered that you would like to explore further; a pedagogical issue about which you would like to reflect as a scholar-practitioner; a writing project, perhaps at work, that spurred your development as a critical rhetorician. In other words, insofar as the statement is autobiographical, it should offer a glimpse of your professional goals. Of course, those goals are also personal, but the information that is of most use to us concerns how you have learned to think and write, about what, and to what further end.

Equally important is the way the statement reflects your informed understanding of the character and demands of the MA concentration to which you’re applying. The Admissions Committee looks to see whether your goals are compatible with those of your chosen concentration, as evinced both by our descriptive materials and its particular course of study. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the specific requirements of your concentration and, as needed, the career possibilities associated with it. And please feel free to contact the English Department for further information.

George Mason University scaffolds by defining what they believe the “goals statement” should function as by telling candidates that it should “introduce yourself to the department as a thinker, a scholar, a teacher, a writer.” This statement gives the candidate an idea of what this text seeks to accomplish in this context. The designers then write, “The Admissions Committee is looking to assess your preparedness for rigorous graduate study…..” By writing this, the candidates are made aware of how the admissions committee will evaluate her/his text.

The designers not only provide a note that being specific about “prior college-level experience studying English in its various manifestations” will assist the candidate in accomplishing this objective but further provide examples of how a candidate might execute a discussion of their experience in English studies. Following these examples, the designers provide a helpful statement that provides scaffolding on what they mean by
“autobiographical,” “professional,” “personal,” and “goals.” The prompt designers then write more on the evaluation of this prompt, noting that the statement should reflect the candidates’ understanding of the “character and demands of the MA concentration,” further noting that the Admissions Committee is bearing in mind to whether there is a compatibility of goals. Most interesting, the designers then note where the candidate can find information that will help her/him accomplish this goal, encouraging the study of these textual resources by requesting that candidates “[p]lease take time to familiarize” themselves with the requirements and career possibilities associated with their chosen concentration, a task (studying an institution’s available resources) suggested to candidates in my previous section of this “Discussion.” By including this (and other) textual moment(s), the designers aren’t assuming that candidates will know how to accomplish the demands of this prompt. It isn’t assumed that candidates will know that certain texts written by the institution and found on their website will help them accomplish these tasks. The candidate is scaffolded to understand this information. The candidate is also scaffolded to understand that not all autobiographical information is useful in this genre in this context. By providing the statement on the extent to which this genre can be autobiographical, there isn’t an inherent assumption that a candidate will know how the admissions committee views the “personal/autobiographical” and “professional.”

Another recommendation here is the teaching and promoting of generous reading practices in evaluations of “statements of purpose.” As mentioned in the “Introduction,” there are still some entrenched constructs of “error” and the ramifications of these constructs can and have been shown to affect the way we read, or listen, and our
responses (Hull et al., 2009; Johnson and VanBrackle, 2012; Lu, 2004; Williams, 1981/2009). If we are to create a space in which candidates for our graduate programs have an equal opportunity to craft a text that demonstrates the constructs we are assessing, we can’t ignore the practices we take up in reading these texts. To take on Lu’s (2004) and Royster’s (1996) approaches to language use, as responsible and responsive, they would encourage us as readers to read by first “delay[ing] our sound bites and lessons until we have examined the social, cultural, economic, as well as linguistic realities…” (Lu, p.22) and “negotiate meaning” with an intent to value (Royster, p. 38).

Royster points to a valuable insight, noting “[w]e all deserve to be taken seriously, which means that critical inquiry and discovery are absolutely necessary” (p. 33). While candidates for graduate study are electing to be assessed by graduate admissions committees as they apply for our programs, they deserve to be taken seriously with the kind of reading that we give to authors of scholarly texts (see Williams, 1981/2009), deserving of the “critical inquiry and discovery” we reserve for texts that we value (Royster, p. 33). As graduate students craft “statements of purpose” for graduate admissions committees, dutifully working to do their best to meet the expectations set before them in the writing prompts s/he encounters, we (as the readers of these texts) might consider this responsibility of reading these texts with similar dutifulness, being as Lu (2004) refers to this language practice: responsible and responsive (p. 16), seeing “errors” as discursive practices to inquire about and learn from.

I hope that the work I have done here may start future work with graduate matriculation. As I have done the work of analyzing “statement of purpose” prompts and discussed how scaffolding is a useful strategy that is largely missing from this corpus, I
hope that my findings prompt conversations amongst graduate admissions committees to take another look at their prompts and consider whether they, in their current state, are putting the admissions committee in a position to evaluate all of their candidates equally. As candidates prepare to apply to graduate programs in English, they will encounter prompts that can reflect a rich variety amongst graduate programs, and they might not be able to see the differences or have a tacit understanding that (for example) Washington State University has expectations and operates under certain assumptions that differ from George Mason University. My choice to focus on English graduate programs provides me with the space to have a similar experience to a candidate (who is usually only applying to one field of study) as my findings only reflect graduate admissions for one discipline. The problem a candidate might face, as stated previously, is that a candidate only applying to a handful of institutions might not have the same tacit understanding of the ambiguousness of these prompts as I now have from this study of the “statements of purpose” genre as it functions in English graduate programs. A limitation here is that I only studied public institutions. A candidate applying for graduate programs in English might be applying to both public and private institutions, which might further cause contextual differences in the conventions of a “statement of purpose,” the underlying assumptions, and tensions involved with composing this genre for an admissions committee in a private institution. Thus, there might be much more variety amongst institutions than discussed here.

Writing Studies

The Rhetoric and Composition field, which is also heavily involved in matriculation, would benefit from more work in graduate examinations, and this study
and its conversations about matriculation through my study of graduate matriculation and the genre of the “statement of purpose” can inform future study in this research area. In particular, this study provides findings that can contribute to a conversation about potentially excluded populations, which seems to emerge as a conversation that rhetorical genre studies is interested in. With an assumption that a shared knowledge exists between candidates applying for admission and those evaluators in the admission committees, the context in which this activity takes place influences the assumptions and tensions of these prompts, which are invisible to candidates. The lack of access to this knowledge then plays a role in how a candidate prepares their matriculation genres and is evaluated based on those matriculation genres.

As stated in my “Introduction,” while the Rhetoric and Composition field lacks scholarship on graduate matriculation, there were studies completed in other practicum-based fields that contributed to this subject. We can also benefit from these fields’ scholarship on graduate matriculation as we prepare to explore this research area further. To turn to Karazsia and McMurtry’s (2012) study, they provide a study that is useful in our future discussions about “statement of purpose” prompts that we make available to candidates. To draw from their study, we might ask some of the following questions in our considerations of prompts and possible reworking of these prompts: In our own departments and schools of thought, what are our expectations of candidates seeking admissions? How might we select candidates who meet these expectations? Furthermore, Walfish and Moreira (2005) might add an inquiry on how much weight we ascribe to these matriculation genres, and is it important that our candidates are aware of these differences in weightings? And finally, I would suggest that we take on the following
questions: Do the genres we require for matriculation applications assist us in making matriculation decisions? And do our prompts to candidates mask assumptions or hide tensions that they would benefit from having a knowledge of as they write to our admissions committees in an effort to seek admission?

**Graduate Matriculation Researchers**

Conversely, these studies on the matriculation of other fields’ can benefit from using rhetorical genre studies and other composition scholars. While graduate matriculation researchers are studying critical aspects of their matriculation processes, the inclusion of rhetorical genre and composition studies would help to explain some of their findings and inform the framework of their studies, especially as these fields are interested in the contextualized engagement of genres for purposes that are specific to that community. As an example of how rhetorical genre studies can be applied to one of these studies in genre matriculation, is Walfish and Moreira’s (2005) exploration on how genres are weighted in matriculation decisions.

They find that the “interview performance” is the most highly weighted genre. However, like a “statement of purpose,” the expectations and conventions might differ substantially depending on who is conducting the interview and what institution this interview is taking place for. Even the program of study could influence how the interview is conducted, what questions are asked, what assumptions underlie the questions, expectations of how a “promising candidate” might respond and conduct themselves in an interview, etc. In pursuit of these questions, writing studies and its research areas (such as rhetorical genre studies) would be a useful lens, providing scholarship that is interested in exploring socially constructed genres (through the
specific uses and engagement with genres within its unique social context to better understand its conventions, generic historic evolution and/or stabilization) and potential research into “errors,” writing assessment, and rater bias. Walfish and Moreira (2005) could be further extended by Dryer’s (2013) study of “writing ability” as a construct from evaluative genres (rubrics and grade definitions) from FYC programs. This study would better explain the assessed constructs and allow Walfish and Moreira (2005) to analyze whether these highly weighted genres are accomplishing their purpose of helping graduate admissions committees evaluate candidates’ demonstration of assessed constructs and how these genres work to accomplish this purpose.

Furthermore, with this work on the expectations of raters, it might be interesting if writing studies’ scholars that have done work on reader/rater biases, expectations, and “errors” were in context with Walfish and Moreira’s (2005) work, especially if they decide to pursue follow up work on the raters’ expectations of these genres and the evaluations of these genres. They might benefit from the work of Giltrow (2003) on the myth of the standardization of language, the work of scholars on translingualism (for example see Lu (2004); Pennycook (2008)), and scholars discussing the phenomenology of “error” (for example see Williams (1981/2009); Johnson and VanBrackle (2012)). These scholars would encourage Walfish and Moreira’s work to focus on the other influences (such as notions of a standardized language and entrenched ideas of “errors”) that readers bring to a reading. In particular, Tardy and Matsuda’s (2009) article on voice construction of editorial board members could prove to be an informative text on how readers construct identities of authors, even if identifying qualities are removed from the texts. To Walfish and Moreira’s possible future work, it could inform ways of an
understanding of how graduate admissions committees might construct candidates’
voices through their texts (prior to interviews), and prompt further inquiring into the
possible similarities of contrasts between these textual constructions of identity and the
identities encountered in interviews. In addition, Royster (1996), who promotes the idea
of reading as “listening” and the responsibility of “responding,” would follow as an
intriguing addition to Walfish and Moreira’s work, should they choose to make
suggestions for graduate admissions committees for marriage and family therapy reading
practices. The other graduate matriculation scholarship (discussed in this study) and
recommended RGS scholarship are included in Appendix E to demonstrate how some
RGS and composition studies might be put into conversation with graduate matriculation
researchers.

Conclusion

As discussed through this study of the graduate matriculation examinations, the
current canon of genres required for matriculation include five genres: GPA/transcripts,
GRE General Test Scores, Letters of Recommendation, Writing Samples, and the
“Statement of Purpose.” This study chooses to look closely at the “statement of purpose”
genre. In the exploration of this genre’s conventions and what kinds of writing are
promoted, I find that in 1-2 pages, candidates are expected to discuss their “goals,”
“interests,” and “purpose,” promoting length-driven texts that are not guided by
university-provided context. These studied universities provide prompts that lack
scaffolding to provide this guidance, and as a result, are ambiguous in the expectations of
candidates for graduate studies in “English.”
The ambiguousness of “statement of purpose” prompts might have the possible benefit of making it more difficult for candidates to be admitted to graduate school, possibly granting the institution a level of prestige. This benefit could be regarded as a useful purpose of such a prompt. Other stakeholders might consider that a “too” specific prompt, might deter candidates from applying, limiting the number of candidates to choose from. While a scaffolded and specific prompt might come with the possible cost of deterring candidates, there is the possibility that these prompts might be deterring those candidates who are not as invested in graduate study at the particular institution, because a candidate who might be more interested or committed to one university over another might be more committed to responding to a seemingly “demanding” prompt by reading available resources and investing more time in research and preparation towards crafting a “statement of purpose.”

Like a potential employee can be grateful for the accessibility to information that helps her/him know more about the company and how s/he might fit in, candidates for graduate admission would be grateful for the accessibility of this information. Candidates might want to apply to a university that provides them with the necessary resources to craft a response they feel demonstrates their “promise” as a graduate student, that reflects what they want to present to graduate matriculation committees. Thus, while it could narrow the candidate pool, asking candidates to respond a prompt that is more specific to the program might have the benefit of assisting admissions committee in selecting candidates that are “good fits” with the program and show “potential.” And as candidates who are possibly “good fits” with the program might find more scaffolding helpful in composing their response to the prompt, the scaffolding might then put candidates in a
position to demonstrate these qualities to the admissions committees and meet their expectations.

In my exploration of these prompts, I find that with the variety amongst “statement of purpose” prompts and the relative scarcity of scaffolding, there are occluded tensions and assumptions that could hinder some populations of candidates as they compose a “statement of purpose” for their applications. Variety in genre names (and connected topic descriptions and lack of scaffolding) and how prompt designers discuss the inclusion of the “personal” signals that prompt designers, who are aware of these nuanced meanings and assumptions, expect candidates to have a knowledge of this assumed shared knowledge, when in fact, candidates might not share an understanding of this knowledge. And as a result, the implied purpose of a “statement of purpose” (that candidates can have a space to address evaluators on why s/he is a “good fit” and explain her/his complexity as a scholar) is interrupted by a lack of scaffolding. While candidates with this knowledge will be more likely capable of designing a “statement of purpose” that accomplishes this goal while navigating the occluded tensions of the graduate admissions committee, a candidate without this knowledge will not have the same access to resources or assumed shared knowledge, and the invisible assumptions will hinder this candidate in her/his effort to demonstrate her/his ability to be a “promising graduate student,” capable of the rigorous graduate coursework they will encounter once admitted.
REFERENCES


Royster, J. J. (1996). When the first voice you hear is not your own. *College Composition and Communication, 47*(1), 29-40.


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8 The same prompt was made available in all two available MA graduate programs of study, but for the purposes of providing a link, one program has been used as a reference.


University of South Florida (Tampa) – English Department. (2014). Admission to the MA Program in Rhetoric and Composition. Retrieved from http://english.usf.edu/graduate/concentrations/rc/admissions


* The same prompt was made available in all three available MA graduate programs of study, but for the purposes of providing a link, one program has been used as a reference.


Appendix A: “Statement of Purpose” Submitted to UMaine for Admission

Teaching Composition Takes Creativity: My Personal Statement

As Dan Rather explains, “The dream begins with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called ‘truth.’” As I have had teachers who were experts at tugging, pushing, leading, and believing, I want to be what my teachers were for me, people who helped me discover who I was and what parts of life gave me breath. Writing has been a large part of my life ever since I was young, but teachers have shown me how this area of my life could help me through tough situations. They showed me how writing can be used powerfully to make strong, sound arguments and evoke emotions by the author’s choices. I would love to get a degree in composition, pedagogy and creative writing at UMO, as I would gain the opportunity to learn new knowledge on the subjects that have always impassioned me from the very people who live to inspire others.

Composition, pedagogy, and creative writing will create a wonderful dynamic in my educational experience. Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood explain that “…writing is viewed as a means of self-discovery. By exploring language as a mode of self-expression, students come to know themselves and to develop an ‘authentic voice’ in their writing” (3). As stated by Murphy and Sherwood, writing is vital tool students need to discover their own voice as they construct their ideas in classes and on into their future. In her book about creative writing, Kim Addonizio also discusses discovery and self-realization through writing. She notes, “Art is a way of dealing with hopelessness, with anger and despair and loss. It is a creative response. While there is a real distinction between art and therapy, the truth is that art is therapeutic. It helps you take something that is within you and make a place for it outside of yourself” (58). As these authors note, writing is important to that mode of self-discovery. Whether a student desires to

Word Count: 500
find his or her voice while writing about how skin cancer develops or needs to deal with a painful experience, writing is a tool to aid in self-discovery.

This degree from UMO will assist me in my further investigation of how the powerful word can be used for academia and creativity. In addition, a study of pedagogy will help me to be the professor that I find most valuable. In my future, I want to be a professor that shows students how to speak in their own unique voice and can demonstrate how words can evoke emotions, memories, and connections between the readers and authors. With me, I will carry the words of my favorite professor, Dr. Pifer, who said, "A novel, a poem, writing, doesn’t have a life until it has a reader." I want to be a professor who teaches students how authors use words to create feelings, but it is their reader that has the responsibility to respond.
### Table A.1: Definitions of “Format/Style” Subcodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format/Style Subcode</th>
<th>Operationalized Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>a description of how long the “statement of purpose” should be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spacing</td>
<td>The preferred spacing requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed</td>
<td>a note that describes the text as “detailed”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Style</td>
<td>This is a description of the text or a note that the “SOP” should be in the style of particular genre (i.e. letter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typed</td>
<td>a note that the SOP should be typed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Dept (for “F/S” directions)</td>
<td>This is a note that candidates can contact the dept. for format/style directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>This code indicates that the prompt designers either included an organization to be implemented or a note that the text should be “organized.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG#s</td>
<td>This is a note to candidates that there should be page numbers in this text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C: Definitions of “Topic Description” Subcodes

Table A.2: Definitions of “Topic Description” Subcodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Description Subcode</th>
<th>Operationalized Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Instances in which topics relating to “goals” or “objectives” were requested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>Instances of the word “interests”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>“Purpose” was used in instances in which the word purpose, or reason, was used by prompt designers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss any previous experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Requests information about past, and may or may not be specific in requesting background information in regards to a particular area of life (e.g. educational background).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss what has prepared them either ambiguously or in particular for studies or field of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>Requests candidates to name their selected concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss accomplishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss how either (a) how the candidate will benefit from the program/degree or/and (b) how the program will benefit from the candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of Study</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their area of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility / Fit</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss how they see her/himself fitting into the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss some aspect (such as reasoning for selection) of the program the candidate is applying to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss research as a topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferring</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss the reasons (if applicable) for her/his transfer to this university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss her/his strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss her/his expectations from the school/program she/he is applying to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application Status</td>
<td>Requests candidates to detail whether they wish to pursue a TA/GAship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Requests candidates to explain either (a) items in their record or (b) a gap in their academic career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss any faculty they wish to work with and why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlight/Explain Aspects of Application</td>
<td>Requests candidates to use the Statement of Purpose as an opportunity to highlight or explain any aspects of their application they feel they want to or that might benefit from more context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Requests candidate to explain their selection of a generalist track of study or a specialized track.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Info</td>
<td>Requests candidates to provide their basic information (e.g. name, address, phone number, email, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desires</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their desires for the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intro to Self</td>
<td>Requests from designers to “tell us about yourself”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Work</td>
<td>Provided as an example topic that candidates could discuss.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table A.2 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>Requests for candidates to discuss either their past or future projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their competence in a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Program/Courses</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss any past programs/courses they feel might be relevant to their application.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>Requests for candidates to discuss their academic ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prove</td>
<td>Requests candidates to prove why she/he feels that she/he is a good candidate with the help of other topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their &quot;sense of direction&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Conversations</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss how she/he sees her/himself engaging in field discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss any certifications she/he possesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Status</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss their full- or part-time status as a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis (and Topic)</td>
<td>Requests candidates to discuss whether they plan to write a thesis, and if so, on what topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Definitions of Omitted “Scaffolding” Subcodes

Table A.3: Definitions of Omitted “Scaffolding” Subcodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcode</th>
<th>Operationalized Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact Department</td>
<td>Provides a note to candidates that she/he can contact the department with any other questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Provides cautions or notes to candidates on a “writing process”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate School</td>
<td>Provides a note to candidates on how the Graduate School defines a complete application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Provides reasons behind a choice the designers make in the prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>Makes an evaluative statement about what a “good” “statement of purpose” is/does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Discusses that the SOP can be a place that candidates can use to explain anything that they feel might need further context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution of Program</td>
<td>Notes to candidates that the program can evolve over time and provides context for a question that they ask (generalist vs. specialized tracks of study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA Only Prompts</td>
<td>Provides a distinctive note to candidates on what prompt is for MA candidates only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Describes something as being “helpful” to the committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coversheet Directions</td>
<td>Provides directions on including a coversheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Information</td>
<td>Makes a note that a “Statement of Purpose” provides qualitative information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Purpose</td>
<td>Makes a note to candidates that the “Statement of Purpose” also serves an alternative purpose (e.g. application for fellowship/TA/GAship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides Form Sentence</td>
<td>Provides a form sentence for candidates to use in some part of her/his “statement of purpose”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended</td>
<td>Describes the “statement of purpose” as recommended, giving the candidate an option of not submitting a “statement of purpose”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for Importance</td>
<td>Provides candidates with reasoning why the “statement of purpose” is important in her/his matriculation decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications Specific to Program</td>
<td>Provides specific directions for applying to varying programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix E: Putting Writing Studies in Conversation with Graduate Matriculation Studies

### Table A.4: Putting Writing Studies in Conversation with Graduate Matriculation Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduate Matriculation Researcher(s)</th>
<th>RGS Researcher(s)</th>
<th>Benefit of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colarelli et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Dryer (2013)</td>
<td>• This study would help with further investigating the approach of quantifying candidate’s qualifications in preparation for the top-down approach, with speculations that this quantifying might rely on operationalized underlying theoretical constructs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Foley and Hijazi (2013)              | Connors (1997) & Elliot (2005) & Dryer (2013) | • Connors and Elliot provide historical accounts can add to the context of assessed constructs (in particular the attempted assessment of "intelligence"), allowing Foley and Hijazi to work towards empirical questions: e.g. If academic performance can be predicted during graduate admissions (they find that it can), then what makes the genre of MMI more effective at predicting academic performance.  
• Dryer’s study provides insight about constructs that would benefit their own work with their construct of “academic performance.” |
| Dawes (1971)                        | Deane (2013)      | • Deane (2013) would be useful to understand what is being meant by “graduate school performance,” and how has this construct changed in meaning since 1971, and how might we predict this construct and who might be unfairly overlooked in an effort to predict graduate school performance? |
| Katz et al. (2009)                  | Beck and Jeffery (2007) & McCarthey (2008) | • Their findings might bolster those of Katz et al. because they provide a construct validity discussion of the state exams and the disconnect between “what students are asked to produce and what they are rewarded for producing (p. 75), paralleling the findings in Katz et al. (2009) with the lack of predictive validity for the construct(s) they are assessing in graduate admissions to their nursing program.  
• McCarthey’s findings could be useful to bolstering Katz et al.’s (2009) findings, both finding that there are negative impacts on those candidates/students of low-income and minorities. |
| Karazia and McMurtry (2012)         | Huot (2002)       | • The work in Huot’s (2002) (Re)articulation of Writing Assessment would enhance the work of Karazia and McMurtry (2012) with his work showing the power in assessment and how assessment has an effect on the curriculum. |
BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR

Megan D. Bishop Gervais was born in Simi Valley, California on January 29, 1991. She attended Grace Brethren School before her family moved to Maine, where she attended Caravel Middle School and Hermon High school. In the middle of her sophomore year, she was pulled out of the public high school and homeschooled through Lighthouse Christian Academy for the remainder of high school until she graduated in 2009. She then majored in English and earned her Bachelor of Science in English from Husson University, located in Bangor, Maine.

During her undergraduate education, she was a consultant and the student coordinator of the writing center. She was later a graduate assistant of the writing center at UMaine during her time in the Master’s of Arts program in English, and in her second year in the program, was a teaching assistant for English 101 (UMaine’s freshman composition course). Outside of studying Writing Studies, she enjoys spending as much time by the ocean as possible. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in August 2016.