

METAGENERIC COMPETENCE IN OFFICIAL LETTER: FROM FORMAL PRESCRIPTIONS TO FUNCTIONAL TRACES IN THE META-GENRE WRITING MANUAL

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- **ABSTRACT:** Based on the notion of meta-generic competence, we aim to analyze how writing manuals address the formal and functional attributes of the official letter genre, to suggest guidelines that may assist in writing this genre. Methodologically, we use Document Analysis (Cellard, 2008; Alves *et al.*, 2021) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Bessa; Sato, 2018) to examine writing manuals and academic productions that address this genre. Theoretically, we draw on the notion of discursive genres from socio-rhetorical and socio-discursive perspectives (Meurer *et al.*, 2005), linking it to the idea of meta-generic competence, which results from other language competencies represented in linguistic-discursive, pragmatic, socio-cognitive, and socio-interactional dimensions (Albuquerque, 2022). Analytically, we found that the manuals focus on the formal properties of the genre and that academic productions make little progress in the debate regarding official letter. We conclude that access to the functional attributes of this genre, socially motivated, would contribute to the autonomy of the interlocutors in reading and writing the official letter.
- **KEYWORDS:** Meta-generic competence; Official letter; Discursive genres; Critical document analysis.

Introduction

It is publicly recognized that writing manuals, caught between injunction and creativity, lean toward normativity under the argument that standardization, impersonality, clarity, formality, and conciseness – as attributes of Official Writing – would enhance the public access to information, as emphasized by the *Manual de Redação da Presidência da República* (Brazil, 1991b, 2002b, 2018b), which has been

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a major reference in the production of writing manuals at federal, state, district, and municipal levels since 1991.¹ Based on this statement, we understand that writing manuals (i) has meta-genres perspectives (Giltrow, 2002), given that their injunctive and metalinguistic nature direct the speech and the writing to specific contexts, not always in accordance (Nunes; Silveira, 2018); and (ii) are based exclusively on universal and vague normative attributes, disregarding sociocultural practices and the emerging socio-rhetorical aspects of *manualized* discursive genres.

Regarding meta-genres, we propose that writing manuals function as a genre category whose purpose, about the prefix *meta-*, would be to promote reflexivity concerning how other genre(s) work. It is important to emphasize that “every meta-genre is also a genre, but not every genre is a meta-genre,”² which would place the former as a broader category encompassing the latter (Nunes; Silveira, 2018, p. 305-306). In general, meta-genres guide the production of genres (Giltrow, 2002), including structure, style, and socio-rhetorical aspects (Cantuário; Alves Filho, 2021), prescribing guidelines that simultaneously standardize what should (not) be produced in genres (Nunes; Silveira, 2018) and discard/endorse certain expressions (Giltrow, 2002).

Concerning the attributes emphasized by meta-genres, *manualization* could contribute to the creation of myths regarding standardization, impersonality, clarity, formality, and conciseness, adopting *all-or-nothing* stances: either there is standardization, impersonality, clarity, formality, and conciseness, or there is not. To illustrate, we present Guerra’s reflections (1970, p. 72), for whom impersonality is a myth that, in excess, “can either lead someone to heaven or throw them into the depths of hell.”³ Breaking away from this binary and dichotomous perspective, Guerra (1970, p. 75) argues that “neither extreme impersonality, to the point of crystallizing into expressions that long ago lost their vitality, nor the irresponsible freedom of wanting to turn a simple piece of information into a page of literary twists”⁴ would be coherent stances in the writing of official texts.

In summary, we question the effectiveness of this meta-genre in guiding social actors inscribed in a given genre, considering that the emphasis on normativity (often based solely on esthetic criteria); the imprecise and vague dichotomous conception related to the Official Writing attributes; and the prescriptions dissociated from sociocultural practices

¹ With Decree nº 100,000/1991 (Brazil, 1991a), a commission was authorized to review the writing norms proposed in 1937. Following this decree, the following editions were published: (i) the first edition, aimed at simplifying and standardizing the rules (Brazil, 1991b); (ii) the second edition, through Ordinance nº 91/2002 (Brazil, 2002a), to adapt the document to communication forms emerging from advancements in information technology (Brazil, 2002b); and (iii) the third edition, through Ordinance No. 1369/2018 (Brazil, 2018a), to address normative drafting, spelling reform, and new technologies (Brazil, 2018b, n.d.).

² In the original: “*todo metagênero é também um gênero, mas nem todo gênero é um metagênero*” [All translations henceforth are by the author.]

³ In the original: “*tanto pode conduzir alguém ao céu como jogá-lo nas profundezas do inferno*”.

⁴ In the original: “*nem a impessoalidade levada ao extremo, a ponto de se cristalizar em expressões que há muito perderam o viço, nem a liberdade irresponsável de querer transformar uma simples informação numa página de lances literários*”.

and socio-rhetorical aspects unfocus the functional attributes of the genre in linguistic, discursive-textual, pragmatic, socio-cognitive, and socio-interactional dimensions.

It is essential that, in the sociocultural practices of those who are involved in these genres, that these manuals encompass these dimensions and allow the expansion of the meta-generic competence of these individuals. The manuals must validate and be validated by conversational experience, as it is not uncommon for people who have worked in *technical/official writing courses* to learn from practice, curiosity, and personal interest (Silveira, 2005). The current scenario in the field of Linguistics is characterized by a limited interest in discursive genres covered by technical/official writing and by a reduced awareness among interactants regarding the enunciative, ideological, argumentative, pragmatic, and rhetorical aspects emerging from these genres (Silveira, 2007), which reaffirm the need for proposing research aimed at broadening the scope of manuals, considering the dialogue between meta-genre and meta-generic competence.

From the notion of meta-generic competence, our goal is to analyze how writing manuals address the formal and functional attributes of the *official letter* genre. We aim to suggest guidelines that may, somehow, contribute to the writing in this genre. From this general objective, the following specific objectives are derived: (i) to analyze the formal and functional attributes of the *official letter* discursive genre in writing manuals published between 2018 and 2023 by public universities; and (ii) to propose sociocultural skills and linguistic-discursive and interactional strategies that, from the literature review and the analysis of these manuals, relate to the expansion of meta-generic competence in reading and writing official letters – considering the linguistic-discursive, pragmatic, socio-cognitive, and socio-interactional dimensions (Albuquerque, 2022).

We methodologically frame the research within an exclusively qualitative epistemology, adopting Document Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis as methods. Following this, we articulate the theoretical debates related to discursive genres and different language competencies, aiming to bring some conceptual expansion to the notion of meta-generic competence. Analytically, we propose a framework of skills and strategies that integrate meta-generic competence in the *official letter* genre, based on the (meta)generic attributes referenced in writing manuals and in academic productions related to this genre. We hope to contribute not only to the conceptual expansion of the notion of meta-generic competence but also to raise awareness so that the manuals provide pragmatic guidelines for reading and writing official letters.

Research Pathways within a Qualitative (and Critical) Epistemic Framework

Within a qualitative epistemic framework (Silverman, 2000; Mason, 2002; Chizzotti, 2003), we have chosen Document Analysis (Cellard, 2008; Alves *et al.*, 2021) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Bessa; Sato, 2018) as research methods,

given our interest in analyzing writing manuals that provide instructions on the *official letter* genre, aiming to give visibility to the emerging meanings of the meta-genres under analysis. Regarding the attributes of qualitative research, we emphasize its fluid, exploratory, and flexible nature; its data orientation; its sensitivity to context (Mason, 2002); its emphasis on the meanings perceived through sensitive attention (Chizzotti, 2003) and perceived on the processes through which texts depict the *reality* (Silverman, 2000); and the provisional nature of meanings (Albuquerque, 2022).

Document Analysis as a research method allows us to highlight indicators that enable the analyst to construct inferences about what was stated (Bardin, 1977). Additionally, it represents traces of human activity at specific times (Cellard, 2008). Unlike bibliographic research, document research uses “[...] materials that still have not undergone analytical treatment or that could still be reworked according to the research goals”⁵ (Gil, 2002, p. 45).

In this study, we conducted an analytical treatment resonating with our first specific objective, meta-genres (writing manuals) that regulate the official letter produced within public universities, to map formal and functional attributes of the official letter. As recommended by Alves *et al.* (2021), we sought to select, analyze, organize, categorize, (re)read, systematize, and (re)(de)construct the material (the writing manuals). To do this, we searched on Google using the keywords: *writing manual* and *university*. As inclusion criteria, we decided to select meta-genres: (i) published between 2018 and 2023;⁶ (ii) produced by higher education institutions (federal universities) located in different regions of the country; and (iii) developed by a committee, which allowed us to identify the authorship of the involved professionals.

As an exclusion criterion, we disregarded manuals that, besides not fitting the inclusion criteria, focused on formatting aspects. We stopped generating data based on the saturation criterion when we noted that the generic formal and functional attributes of the official letter began to repeat. Based on Cellard (2008), the analysis was divided into preliminary analysis (context, authorship, authenticity and reliability of the text, nature of the text, key concepts, and internal logic of the text) and actual analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis as a research method allows this study to reflect on the three dimensions of discourse – social practice, discursive practice, and text – and to seek, in some way, the discursive change (Fairclough, 2001) regarding the generic attributes established in the writing manuals. In this research, the text would be the writing manual itself; the discursive practice would involve the production, distribution, and consumption of such manuals (public institutions that would produce manuals for consultation by civil servants); and the social practice would encompass the actions of interactants permeated by ideological and hegemonic aspects that govern the production, distribution, and

⁵ In the original: “[...] materiais que não recebe[ra]m ainda um tratamento analítico, ou que ainda pode[ria]m ser reelaborados de acordo com os objetos da pesquisa”.

⁶ We were interested in this time frame, considering that from 2018 onwards, the *Manual de Redação da Presidência da República* has adopted a single nomenclature for the official letter: notice, and memorandum referring to them as the standard official letter (Brazil, 2018b). Finally, we note that the data generation took place in 2023.

consumption of such texts. We assume that power relations emerge both from the writing of manuals and the interaction of social actors linked to educational institutions.

Bessa and Sato (2018, p. 129) recommend that discourse analysts: “(1) identify a social problem that has implications for the social order; (2) seek semiotic elements for analysis; and (3) focus on practice to understand the discourse analysis.”⁷In line with our second specific objective and general objective, we assume that (1) the social problem is the inefficacy of writing manuals in guiding the reading and writing of official letters; (2) the semiotic elements indicate the absence/presence of functional attributes of this genre in these manuals; (3) to look to a practice that includes a literature review on discursive genres, meta-generic competence and the analysis of the manuals. That seeks to apply the notion of meta-generic competence in the analysis of official letters and to suggest that writing manuals include more pragmatic guidelines for reading and writing this discursive genre.

Thus, (i) we searched for meta-genres on Google using the keywords: *writing manual* and *university*; (ii) we selected from this search two meta-genres that met our inclusion/exclusion criteria; (iii) we mapped the formal and functional attributes of the official letter in these meta-genres; (iv) based on the literature review and the analysis of the writing manuals, we proposed a framework with four sociocultural skills and 22 linguistic-discursive and interactional strategies that would integrate the meta-generic competence in the *official letter* genre; and (v) we highlighted more pragmatic suggestions related to it. Our aim for these writing manuals is to truly become effective consultation tools. Thus, to contribute to the expansion of users of meta-generic competence.

Converging Theoretical Frameworks: Toward a Conceptual Expansion

In this section, we will first present the notion of discursive genres from socio-rhetorical and socio-discursive perspectives (Meurer *et al.*, 2005), articulating socio-historical, dialogic (Bakhtin, 2010), pragmatic, sociocultural, socio-cognitive (Miller, 1984, 1994; Bazerman, 2004), and socio-interactionist perspectives (Bronckart, 2005). We consider, according to Motta-Roth (2008, p. 368), that the hybrid nature fostered by the intertextuality of different schools of thought is the “most notable quality that the genre studies perspective has to offer to language studies.”⁸ Subsequently, we will link this notion to the concept of meta-generic competence (Bentes *et al.*, 2003; Koch *et al.*, 2007; Koch, 2015; Koch; Elias, 2008, 2012), which results from the acquisition of competencies represented in linguistic-discursive, pragmatic, socio-cognitive, and socio-interactional dimensions (Albuquerque, 2022).

⁷ In the original: “(a) identifica(r) um problema social que tenha implicações para a ordem social; (b) busca(r) elementos semióticos para a análise; e (c) volta(r) o olhar para a prática na busca por sua compreensão”.

⁸ In the original: “qualidade mais notável que a perspectiva dos estudos de gêneros tem a oferecer aos estudos da linguagem”.

By adopting a hybrid paradigm of theoretical approaches, we assess that all these perspectives converge as they consider genres as language uses associated with social activities, as well as discursive actions resulting from recurrent genres, and to some extent, stable in form, content, and style (Motta-Roth, 2008). Furthermore, these perspectives bring a generic notion that, by addressing social issues, they go beyond the boundaries of the co-text, predicting language practices that are predictable and cognitively feasible (Albuquerque, 2017). It should be noted that the genesis of these theoretical assumptions emerges from Bakhtin (2010), whose legacy, to some extent, guides the theoretical propositions of Miller (1984, 1994), Bazerman (2004), and Bronckart (2005).

Regarding the first perspective (socio-historical and dialogic), genres are infinitely rich and diverse “because the possibilities of multifaceted human activity are inexhaustible, and in each field of this activity, the repertoire of speech genres is complete” (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 262).⁹ Genres, conceived as relatively stable utterances, include compositional structure, thematic content, and style (Bakhtin, 2010). Additionally, Bakhtin (2010) postulates that discursive genres can be linked both to more concrete and immediate social spheres (primary genres) and to more complex and relatively organized/developed cultural environments (secondary genres).

Even though secondary genres (such as the official letter) arise from institutionalized human activities and tend to be more stable, these genres “incorporate and rework various primary (simple) genres” (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 263).¹⁰ As a result, interactants, when engaging in the sociocultural practices emerging from the official *letter genre*, transfer their previous and more immediate experiences to the interaction, and expand their meta-generic competence within this genre. Therefore, we state that these interactants do not produce an official letter *from scratch*.

Regarding the second perspective (pragmatic, sociocultural, and socio-cognitive), discursive genres are seen as typified social actions stemming from recurrent rhetorical situations (Miller, 1984, 1994; Bazerman, 2004). From this perspective, our speech acts would signal typical ways of acting, subscribing us to certain social activities (Bazerman, 2004), so that meaning emerges from the situation and the social context (Miller, 1984) that follow the utterance. These social actions emerging from genres become typical as they become recurrent in different sociocultural practices.

In this perspective, the genre refers to a conventional discourse category; it could be understood through rules; distinguishes itself from form; reveals recurring patterns of language use; and constitutes a rhetorical means to mediate the singular and the recurrent (Miller, 1984); concatenates (micro) linguistic resources in service of (macro) social action; structures shared actions through community decorum (Miller, 1994); and functions as a phenomenon of psychosocial recognition (Bazerman, 2004). Under this

⁹ In the original: “porque são inesgotáveis as possibilidades da multiforme atividade humana e porque em cada campo dessa atividade é integral o repertório de gêneros do discurso”.

¹⁰ In the original: “incorporam e reelaboram diversos gêneros primários (simples)”.

perspective, we propose that expanding meta-generic competence occurs through the gradual familiarization with recurrent rhetorical situations, which enables interactants to become increasingly sensitive to the linguistic (micro) and social (macro) aspects that constitute the genre.

Concerning the third perspective (socio-interactionist), genres would place us between textual constraints/restrictions and textual creativity/freedom (Bronckart, 2005). According to Bronckart (2005), this experience encompasses four mediation spaces of language: (i) mediation by genres (the interactant adapts their knowledge about genres to different social interaction situations); (ii) mediation by signs (the interactant reproduces the signs mobilized in a given text, in line with generic expectations); (iii) mediation by types (the interactant reproduces a type of discourse and uses the most relevant linguistic resources to the conversational situation); and (iv) mediation by learning (the interactant manages the mechanisms of textualization, modalization, and voice distribution). In this regard, expanding meta-generic competence includes managing linguistic-discursive resources (from lexico-grammatical to discursive-textual) and evaluating the generic indexes negotiated within interactional instances.

Regarding language competencies, Albuquerque (2015) discusses multiple competencies related to second language teaching. Based on this proposal, we assume that grammatical, communicative, interactional, pragmatic, sociocultural, and discursive competencies epistemically expand the notion of meta-generic competence. As Koch and Elias (2008) indicate, this notion implicitly appeared in Bakhtin (2010) when the Russian philosopher suggested that we shape our discourse in discursive genres, identifying them in our earliest words. Similarly, Maingueneau (2005) predicted that each utterance carries a certain generic status.

In Text Linguistics, this notion, coined by Bentes *et al.* (2003), is associated with the recognition of devices of a given genre, the reworking of symbolic content, and the interrelationship with other genres. Later, acquiring meta-generic competence transcends the actions of recognizing and differentiating genres, implying that constant contact with these genres enables us to construct cognitive models (Koch *et al.*, 2007; Koch; Elias, 2012), which allows us to rely upon these genres, using them appropriately (Koch *et al.*, 2007), and especially to interact effectively in social practices (Koch, 2015).

Reviewing the literature, Albuquerque (2022, p. 3) states that the concept of meta-generic competence preserves “the idea that our engagement in a given genre – through social practices of reading and production (oral and written) – enables the acquisition (or expansion) of our meta-generic competence.”¹¹ The author (2022) tries to conceive that meta-generic competence encompasses communicative, interactional, pragmatic, sociocultural, and discursive competencies, implying that language users would be respectively able to assess what is possible, viable, acceptable, and feasible; to achieve their emancipation and construct meaning with others; adjust the force and intentionality

¹¹ In the original: “a ideia de que nossa inscrição em dado gênero – por meio de práticas sociais de leitura e de produção (oral e escrita) – possibilita a aquisição (ou a ampliação) de nossa competência metagenérica”.

of utterances; respect the sociocultural context of interlocutors; and consider ideological and identity negotiations that intersect genre and text.

The concept of linguistic competence originated from Noam Chomsky's generative studies, beginning with the publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. The generativist's theoretical model proposed identifying the functioning of human language (Chomsky, 1957). Strongly opposing prevailing structuralist and behaviorist models, Chomsky argued that linguistic behavior could not be reduced to responses to stimuli through simple repetition and imitation of language, as individuals could formulate novel sentences. Guided by this thought, Chomsky (1959) suggested that language is associated with a biological, innate device in humans, related to the capacity to speak, understand, recognize, and form grammatical sentences in a particular language.

Disagreeing with the idea of an ideal speaker endowed with linguistic competence and belonging to a homogeneous speech community, Hymes (1972) argues that grammatical knowledge is sterile when disconnected from language use – the production of utterances within a given communicative context. In his view (1972), communicative competence encompasses what is socially appropriate: what is possible, viable, acceptable, and feasible in each culture. Concerning language acquisition, he (1972) states that children not only learn to distinguish (un)grammatical sentences but also become capable of producing and evaluating speech acts (their own and others) due to immersion in various social experiences.

Going beyond communicative competence, which focuses on the linear, predictable, controllable, non-conflictual (Albuquerque, 2015), and individual aspects (Young, 1997), Kramsch (1986) proposes the concept of interactional competence, relating it to intercultural negotiation of meaning and the pursuit of true emancipation in language. Young (2008) emphasizes that while communicative competence reveals what people actually know, interactional competence includes what they do with their peers. From this epistemic shift, we reaffirm the intersubjective nature of interactional competence, which emerges in diverse interactions, bringing forth not only world knowledge but primarily intersubjective sharing (Kramsch, 1986). Interactional competence includes the co-construction of meaning through (non)linguistic, identity, and interactional resources, contextually placed within diverse sociocultural practices (Young, 1997, 2008; Filliettaz, 2019).

Although Fraser (2010, p. 15) defines pragmatic competence as “the ability to communicate the intended message [...] in any sociocultural context and to interpret the interlocutor's message as intended,”¹² we assume that, by being more closely situated in an interactional dimension, this ability shifts from communicating/interpreting messages to a negotiating meaning. For us, Thomas (1983) extends the concept to this dimension by recognizing that pragmatic competence involves noticing the force and intentionality of utterances produced by the speaker, considering sociocultural aspects at play in the interaction.

¹² In the original: “a capacidade de comunicar a mensagem pretendida [...] em qualquer contexto sociocultural e de interpretar a mensagem do seu interlocutor tal como foi pretendida”.

Sociocultural competence refers to “the speaker’s knowledge of how to convey messages appropriately within the global social and cultural context of communication, following the pragmatic factors related to language use variation,”¹³ thus including sociocultural contexts, stylistic appropriateness, and (non)verbal communicative aspects (Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 1995, p. 23). Additionally, we consider that sociocultural competence is related to greater familiarity with “cultural patterns (habits, customs), beliefs, values, and social norms of the community”¹⁴ (Armentero Reboredo, 2021, p. 110), highlighting that norms/patterns should be negotiated by social actors.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), discursive competence encompasses knowledge of grammatical principles, communicative functions arising from language use, and the connection between these communicative functions and discursive principles. Besides cohesion and coherence (Canale; Swain, 1980), it would encompass deixis, generic structure, and conversational structure (Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 1995). Charaudeau (2000) includes in this competence the subject’s ability to manipulate and recognize “the discursive staging procedures that will echo situational constraints,”¹⁵ which involves manipulating and recognizing enunciative attitudes, language rituals, discourse organization ways, and both objective and subjective knowledge. For us, this competence also includes principles of textual meaning construction (Koch, 2015).

Based on Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), Koch (2015) suggests that the principles of textual meaning construction include: cohesion (referential and sequential); situationally (the relevance of the text to the communicative situation and the reconstruction of the communicative situation from the text); informativeness (the distribution and degree of information predictability); intertextuality (reference to previously accessed texts); intentionality (the communicative intentions achieved through a given text); acceptability (the acceptance by interlocutors regarding the linguistic manifestation of the other); and, as a result of the confluence of all these principles, coherence, which consists of meanings constructed in intersubjective instances (rather than exclusively material dimensions).

In our proposal of conceptual expansion, we do not compare linguistic competence due to the assumption that every interactant engaged in each genre will produce grammatical sentences in their texts as a function of innate mechanisms triggered during language acquisition. Regarding the other competencies, we conceive that expanding meta-generic competence means to articulate lexico-grammatical and semantic knowledge (grammatical competence) in relation to the discursive genre to be produced.

¹³ In the original: “ao conhecimento do/a falante quanto ao modo de expressar mensagens de forma adequada dentro do contexto social e cultural global de comunicação, em conformidade com os fatores pragmáticos relacionados à variação de uso da língua”.

¹⁴ Author’s translation from the original in Portuguese: “padrões culturais (hábitos, costumes), crenças, valores e normas sociais da comunidade” (Armentero Reboredo, 2021, p. 110).

¹⁵ Author’s translation from the original in Portuguese: “os procedimentos de encenação discursiva que farão eco às coerções situacionais” (Charaudeau 2000, s/p)

Meta-generic competence would also include: producing speech acts that are possible, viable, acceptable, and feasible for a given community (communicative competence) in order to co-construct meaning and mobilize (non)linguistic, identity, and interactional resources with autonomy, achieving emancipation within a given language practice (interactional competence).

From this continuum (between communicating and interacting), meta-generic competence would involve: negotiating with the other the force, intentionality, and acceptability of speech acts (pragmatic competence); evaluating critically cultural patterns and social norms that emerge, to some extent, from a given sociocultural practice (sociocultural competence); and manipulate and recognize the procedures of discursive staging intersected by hegemonic relations that interconnect ideologies, power, and identities (discursive competence).

Meta-generic Competence in the Official Letter Genre

While researching meta-genres through a Google search, we selected two writing manuals: one produced by the Universidade Federal de Alagoas (UFAL) and the other by the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Both manuals included information that went beyond formatting aspects and contained traces of the formal and functional attributes of the *official letter* genre. During this process, we found five manuals without reference to the publication year; 13 manuals produced before 2018; one manual that, despite being produced after 2018, has used the 2002 *Manual de Redação da Presidência da República* as a reference; 11 manuals focusing on formatting aspects; 3 manuals without authorship (no commission identified as having produced the meta-genre); and 9 style/journalism manuals that did not address the genre under study. Additionally, we identified 22 institutions that adopted the 2018 *Manual de Redação da Presidência da República* as the guiding document for institutional writing.

Regarding the *context* item (Cellard, 2008), the two selected manuals state in the *Presentation* section that the documents were produced to offer general guidelines for official writing to the employees of the institutions, aiming to assist in task development, improve administrative activities, enhance information flow efficiency (Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020; Carvalho *et al.*, 2022), contribute to efficient operational management, democratize information access, and promote organizational transparency (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022).

Concerning the *authorship* item (Cellard, 2008), we investigated the academic-professional background of the individuals who formed the committees for writing the manuals. In the *Manual de Atos e Comunicações Oficiais* (Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020), the participants were a communication advisor, executive secretaries, administrative assistants, an administrator, and a professor, all of them were majored, and some of them held specializations, master's, and doctorate degrees. In the *Manual de Atos e Comunicações Oficiais da UFF* (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022) the participants were

an executive secretary, a documentation superintendent, and an archivist – all of them were majored with specializations and master's degrees.

Regarding the authenticity and reliability of the text (Cellard, 2008), we emphasize that the committees established to write the manuals gathered legitimate professionals in meta-genre writing, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of both compositions, and that the document comes directly from the university's website. Both aspects would contribute to the authenticity and reliability of these manuals.

Concerning the nature of the text (Cellard, 2008), we understand that the language is aligned with institutional sociocultural practices, allowing meanings to be constructed by the reader “[...] according to their degree of initiation into the particular context of its production” (Cellard, 2008, p. 302).¹⁶ Regarding the key concepts and internal logic of the text (Cellard, 2008), we observe that both manuals avoid using professional jargon and employ concise and accessible language for the users.

In terms of Fairclough's three-dimensional model (2001), both meta-genres were produced by professionals who, in some way, work in the language field and were distributed by the institutions themselves and were consumed by employees (discursive practice). It should be noted that these manuals mainly provided structural instructions of an injunctive nature, with only a limited discursive-pragmatic approach (social practice). We will now proceed with the analysis of the manuals to examine the formal and functional attributes of the official letter that emerge from this meta-genre, followed by a discussion of the attributes found in academic articles that address the *official letter genre*.

The first manual, produced by UFAL, has defined the official letter as “internal and external correspondence used by public authorities to request, demand, notify, formally communicate about a certain topic, or address matters of service and administrative interest in an official capacity” (Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020, p. 67).¹⁷ It highlights that the salutation should be “Sir/Madam,” and the closing should be “respectfully” (for superior hierarchy interlocutors) and “Sincerely” (for interlocutors of the same or lower hierarchy).

The text is divided into an introduction (presenting the purpose of the communication while avoiding indirect language forms), development (detailing the subject, with information organized into separate paragraphs when there is more than one idea), and conclusion (stating the position on the matter). Additionally, the manual recommends that the file format should be editable, that archiving should be performed for later consultation, and that the file should be saved in a standardized manner to facilitate document retrieval (Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020).

The second manual, produced by UFF, specifies that external official letters are issued by the rector, vice-rector, chief of staff, pro-rectors, superintendents, unit

¹⁶ In the original: “[...] em função de seu grau de iniciação no contexto particular de sua produção”.

¹⁷ In the original: “[...] a correspondência interna e externa usada pelas autoridades públicas para solicitar, reivindicar, notificar, comunicar formalmente sobre determinado tema, tratar de assuntos de serviço e de interesse da administração, em caráter oficial”.

directors, course coordinators, administrative managers, and academic managers, while internal official letters may be issued by other employees, provided they are reviewed by management (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding the content of the official letter, Carvalho *et al.* (2022, p. 20) note that, although it is of an administrative nature, the content “[...] could also involve social matters of the public agent, depending on their position or role”.¹⁸ Similar to the other manual, the same prescriptions regarding salutation, closing, text division, file format, archiving, and file saving are recorded (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022). It is also added that the subject should be specified using a noun phrase (not verbs), that the document retention should comply with the Federal Higher Education Institutions rules, that confidentiality should be classified according to the relevant legislation and subject matter, and that numbering should follow the sequence provided by the unit producing the document (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022).

Although the official letter is a genre frequently mentioned in writing manuals, we found little discussion in the academic realm that could give visibility to the formal and functional attributes of the genre. Therefore, we now present some theoretical contributions to the topic based on what we found in academic productions (particularly in Linguistics).

Before proceeding further, it is worth noting, according to Silveira (2007, p. 1454), that “the official letter is a variety of the complex *letter* genre.”¹⁹ In line with Silva (1997, p. 121), the official letter could therefore be treated as a subgenre of the *letter* genre, whose field of activity – the official correspondence – defines “the activity in which the participants are engaged.”²⁰ These participants, according to Silveira (2008), include the writer (the person who composes and organizes the text), the speaker (the individual who signs and assumes enunciative responsibility), and finally the enunciator (the institution).

It is common for interactants engaged in this genre to simultaneously aim to communicate and promote institutional exchange (Silveira, 2007), seeking, as suggested by Silva *et al.* (2017), to establish an interlocutory relationship marked by cordiality and honors (in the introduction); perform a speech act – such as an order, request, question, etc. – in a mitigated manner (in the development); and return to the idea initially presented, reinforcing the attributes of the interlocutor (in the conclusion). From this perspective, the official letter – defined as “formal written communication adopted in public service between authorities of the same rank, or from authorities to individuals, or from subordinates to superiors”²¹ (Costa, 2012, p. 182) – fulfills specific

¹⁸ In the original: “[...] também vincular matéria de caráter social do agente público em decorrência do seu cargo ou função”.

¹⁹ In the original: “[...] o ofício é uma variedade do complexo gênero carta”.

²⁰ In the original: “[...] em que atividade os participantes estão engajados”.

²¹ In the original: “[...] comunicação escrita formal, adotada no serviço público, entre autoridades da mesma categoria, ou de autoridades a particulares, ou de inferiores a superiores hierárquicos”.

communicative functions (such as: inviting, summoning, notifying, and calling), all of which aim to request someone's presence (Travaglia, 2007).

Regarding linguistic-discursive practices in this discursive genre, we highlight Silveira's (2007) research, which identified the following communicative purposes in official letters: requesting service; forwarding documents to inform, review, or disseminate; inviting to events; informing about events, approvals, requests, consultations, processes, and complaints; sending staff for internships/courses; thanking for invitations and service provision; offering the institution's facilities for events; providing services; notifying; and expressing solidarity. To signal these purposes, it is common for interactants to use a diverse range of metadiscursive²² markers that may manifest at more or less explicit/implicit levels.

As the institution's spokesperson, the speaker can then use various linguistic-discursive resources that, according to Silveira (2008), (i) mark formality with the use of politeness formulas, which, although criticized by official writing manuals, frequently appear, especially in text closings; and (ii) depersonalize the texts through passive voice, nominalization of verbs, and the use of the first-person plural (Alves; Monteiro, 2013), which would lead to the weakening or erasure of the agent, distancing from the subjects, and nullification of agency. Therefore, we assume that these resources, beyond the material domain, subjectively mark the texts, and interactants start to negotiate more/fewer mobile meanings through these texts.

Although plasticity is one of the attributes of discursive genres, writing manuals generally tend to emphasize normative/formal aspects of the genre (Alves; Monteiro, 2013); track the use of grammatical rules and norms, even considering esthetic factors (Silveira, 2005); and disregard generic, sociocultural, textual, discursive, interpersonal, and rhetorical-pragmatic aspects (Silveira, 2005; Santos, 2015; Silva *et al.*, 2017), as well as the socio-communicative practices of the institutions (Alves; Monteiro, 2013).

As meta-genres, manuals use discursive mechanisms to regulate discursive genres, which, despite guiding production, inhibit the creativity of the producers (Giltrow, 2002); provide ideal (and static) models of texts/genres; standardize/uniformize these texts; and obstruct creative and innovative expression possibilities (Nunes; Silveira, 2018). Thus, their idea is somewhat questionable.

Based on aspects found in both writing manuals and academic productions, in line with Albuquerque (2022), Table 1, we have mapped sociocultural skills (H) and linguistic-discursive and interactional strategies (E) that integrate meta-generic competence (C) for reading and writing official letters.

²² From Hyland's (2005) perspective, *metadiscourse*, in a broad sense, refers to the various linguistic symbols used to guide/direct interactants in reading a given text, aiming, therefore, at the understanding of both the text and the writer's stance.

Table 1 – A Proposal for Meta-generic Competence in the *Official Letter* Genre

H1: Understand the socio-communicative function of the official letter genre based on production and circulation conditions	
E.1:	Recognize that external official letters can be produced by rectors, vice-rectors, chiefs of staff, pro-rectors, superintendents, unit directors, course coordinators, and administrative and academic managers (Carvalho <i>et al.</i> , 2022), indicating potentially asymmetric interactions, given that they are produced by interlocutors of higher hierarchy.
E.2:	Recognize that, socially, the internal official letters can be produced by other employees, as long as they are reviewed by management (Carvalho <i>et al.</i> , 2022), indicating potentially symmetric (equal hierarchy interlocutor) and asymmetric (lower hierarchy interlocutor) interactions.
E.3:	Actions such as requesting, claiming, notifying, communicating, discussing, inviting, summoning, notifying, forwarding, disseminating, informing, thanking, offering services, and expressing solidarity (Travaglia, 2007; Silveira, 2007; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020) would be typified social actions from recurrent rhetorical situations (Miller, 1984, 1994; Bazerman, 2004).
E.4:	Engage with the sociocultural context triggered by the participants anticipated in the interaction as an attribute of sociocultural competence (Albuquerque, 2022), balancing constraint and creativity (Bronckart, 2005) based on the sociocultural norms of a given community (Armentero Reboredo, 2021).
E.5:	Consider the institution's specific sociocultural practices regarding the format (editable) of the file, archiving, file saving pattern, retention, confidentiality, and numbering (Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020; Carvalho <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
H2: Consider in both reading and writing that official letters have specific principles of textual meaning construction (Koch, 2015)	
E.1:	Textualize recurrent and typified socio-rhetorical practices (Miller, 1984, 1994; Bazerman, 2004), understanding that the coherence constructed during interactions does not focus on material dimensions or formatting adjustments.
E.2:	Assume that the meanings constructed in texts emerge from a latent pact between reader and author, where the reader accepts the other's linguistic manifestation (acceptability) and the author enunciates communicative intentions (intentionality).

E.3:	Evaluate meanings derived from the use of implicit or explicit intertextual references (Koch <i>et al.</i> , 2007), referring to various documents such as ordinances, laws, decrees, <i>etc.</i>
E.4:	Highlight the socio-communicative function of the <i>official letter</i> genre through linguistic-discursive resources that adhere to the principle of informativeness and promote harmony (politeness), avoiding hyper-politeness ²³ in order to use concise language and thus facilitate greater access to the text's meanings.
E.5:	Recognize, regarding situationally, the relationship between the text and the communicative situation so that the communicative situation drives decision-making in the text, and the text reshapes the communicative situation.
E.6:	Consider, regarding cohesion (referential and sequential), different cohesive resources – from the most explicit to the most implicit – with the aim of (re)constructing discourse objects, facilitating textual progression, and maintaining discourse flow (Koch; Elias, 2008).
E.7:	(Re)construct the compositional plan (Bakhtin, 2010), which can be divided into: introduction (presenting the communication's purpose with marks of cordiality and honors); development (detailing the subject, mitigating the desired speech act: order, request, question); and conclusion (reaffirming the position on the official letter's subject and emphasizing certain attributes of the interlocutor) (Silva <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020; Carvalho <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
E.8:	Standardize the text concerning writing notation aspects (Rojo, 2009) – standard language – and other writing conventions such as formatting or presentation norms prescribed by writing manuals.
H3: Evaluate, along a communicative-interactional continuum, the power relations constructed within the sociocultural practices evoked by the <i>official letter</i> genre	
E.1:	(Re)cognize what would be possible, viable, acceptable, and feasible in the genre, as an attribute of communicative competence, in both the reading and writing of official letters.
E.2:	Manage linguistics, identity, and interactional resources within various sociocultural practices (Young, 1997, 2008; Filliettaz, 2019), such as the use of salutations and closings (Universidade Federal de Alagoas, 2020; Carvalho <i>et al.</i> , 2022), aiming for intersubjective meaning negotiation and true emancipation within the genre as attributes of interactional competence.

²³ A person is considered *hyper-polite* when they produce “a politeness marker in a context where it is deemed completely out of place, or a marker that proves to be excessive” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2017, p. 47).

E.3:	(Re)adjust, according to intersubjective demands, the force, and the intentionality of the enunciation, analyzing them based on the social roles of the social actors involved in the <i>official letter</i> genre, as an attribute of pragmatic competence (Albuquerque, 2022).
E.4:	Manipulate “the procedures of discursive staging that will echo situational constraints” (Charaudeau, 2000), understanding that official letters are imbued with power relations, arising from ideologies and identity negotiations, as attributes of discursive competence (Albuquerque, 2022).
E.5:	Position oneself in the text according to the (pre)established power relations and the interactional (a)symmetry established by the interactants, using linguistic-discursive resources compatible with the social identities of them (rector, pro-rector), as well as the social roles invoked by the genre: writer (who composes and organizes the text), speaker (who signs and assumes enunciative responsibility), and enunciator (the institution), according to Silveira (2008).
H4: Manage voices in the expression of authorship and language modalization	
E.1:	Minimize personal authorship and stylistic expression, understanding that the institution is the enunciator (Silveira, 2008), even though the text’s organization and enunciative responsibility are respectively associated with the writer and the speaker (Silveira, 2008).
E.2:	Mark formality and distance through the use of politeness formulas, resonating with the performed social roles and the assumed social identities during interaction, avoiding hyper-politeness.
E.3:	Evaluate the importance of weakening or erasing the agent, distancing subjects, and nullifying agency.
E.4:	Balance recurrent and typified socio-rhetorical actions (Miller, 1984, 1994; Bazerman, 2004), situated in compositional structure, thematic content, and style (Bakhtin, 2010), between constraint and creativity (Bronckart, 2005), with the caveat that the space for stylistic expression and textual creativity is smaller – but not non-existent – compared to primary genres.

Source: Author’s own work

By mapping the sociocultural skills and linguistic-discursive and interactional strategies related to meta-generic competence, we reaffirm the position of Silveira (2005), Alves and Monteiro (2013), Santos (2015), and Silva *et al.* (2017) regarding the silence of official writing manuals concerning the generic, sociocultural, textual, discursive, interpersonal, and rhetorical-pragmatic aspects that integrate the various institutional activities. We recommend, therefore, that the manuals should address in

brief notes what lies behind what is said, discussing possible, viable, acceptable, and feasible linguistic-discursive choices in the *official letter* genre; the reasons that would motivate the interactional (a)symmetry of social actors inscribed in this discursive genre; the cohesion between rhetorically typified social practice and text writing; the boundaries between generic-textual restrictions and freedom of authorship; the particularities of the principles of textual meaning construction; and the effects arising from language modalization in interactions.

Final Considerations

Based on a critical (qualitative) document analysis, our research confirmed two assumptions: writing manuals still emphasize the formal aspects (especially formatting and presentation) of the genres they cover, and language research has made limited progress in the debate concerning official writing genres. In the research process, we found two manuals that only slightly addressed functional aspects, covering the communicative purposes of the official letter, the interlocutors expected in the genre, the linguistic uses related to hierarchy, and the practices of archiving, saving, and confidentiality; as well as academic productions that addressed the social roles of participants, the range of possible communicative purposes, and the use of linguistic-discursive resources capable of adding greater formality, politeness, and distancing from the interaction.

The traces of formal and functional attributes of the official letter found in the writing manuals and academic productions – as well as the literature review related to the notions of discursive genres and meta-generic competence – enabled us to create a framework with four sociocultural skills (related to socio-communicative function, principles of textual meaning construction, power relations in the communicative interactional continuum, and voice management). We listed a total of 22 strategies that could, to some extent, contribute to the expansion of meta-generic competence in the reading and writing of official letters. We highlighted two challenges: (i) transcending the linguistic dimension, as the instrumental writing nature permeates the social practices of these institutions; and (ii) raising users' awareness of the idea that the principles of textual meaning construction are ideologically and identity-oriented/affected by the sociocultural practices inherent in this genre.

While we agree with the question raised by Nunes and Silveira (2018) that meta-genres alone are insufficient to meet users' needs, we believe that official writing manuals addressing the *official letter* discursive genre could include more functional information to assist interactants in writing this genre – from linguistic-discursive to pragmatic-interactional aspects – seeking to navigate between generic-textual constraints and enunciative possibilities. We, therefore, adhere to the idea that meta-generic experience and functional guidelines would allow interactants to access socio-culturally motivated generic conventions, as well as to achieve reading and writing autonomy. Finally, we

emphasize that conceiving these manuals as mere reference tools, disconnected from conversational experiences, would be unfruitful.

ALBUQUERQUE, Rodrigo; MORATO, Anna Luiza de Vasconcellos Cavalcanti. A competência metagenérica em ofícios: das prescrições formais aos vestígios funcionais no metagênero manual de redação. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v. 69, 2025.

- *RESUMO: A partir da noção de competência metagenérica, almejamos analisar de que modo os manuais de redação abordam os atributos formais e funcionais do gênero ofício, com vistas a sugerir orientações que possam, de algum modo, colaborar com a escrita nesse gênero. No âmbito metodológico, utilizamos a Análise Documental (Cellard, 2008; Alves et al., 2021) e a Análise de Discurso Crítica (Fairclough, 2001; Bessa; Sato, 2018) para examinar manuais de redação e produções acadêmicas que abordassem o gênero em questão. No âmbito teórico, valemo-nos da noção de gêneros discursivos sob os enfoques sociorretórico e sociodiscursivo (Meurer et al., 2005), atrelando-a à noção de competência metagenérica, a qual é resultante de outras competências de linguagem que se instanciam em dimensões linguístico-discursivas, pragmáticas, sociocognitivas e sociointeracionais (Albuquerque, 2022). No âmbito analítico, constatamos, a partir de um quadro de habilidades socioculturais e de estratégias linguístico-discursivas e interacionais, que os manuais focalizam propriedades formais do gênero e que as produções acadêmicas pouco avançam no debate relativo ao ofício. Concluímos que o acesso a atributos funcionais desse gênero, motivados socioculturalmente, contribuiria para a autonomia dos/as interlocutores/as na leitura e na escrita do ofício.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Competência metagenérica; Ofício; Gêneros discursivos; Análise documental crítica.*

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