Using BEAM/BEAT to Teach Research-Based Writing

What’s the problem with the standard nomenclature for sources (primary, secondary, tertiary)?

- works for some disciplines but not at all for others
- conflates genre and function
- serves researchers in particular fields, but not writers

→ What we need is a nomenclature that allows us to talk directly and straightforwardly about how writers use their sources on the page.

**BEAM/BEAT**

**Background Sources:** Materials whose claims a writer accepts as grounding facts. Writers regard their background sources as authoritative and expect their readers to do the same. Because writers sometimes treat information gleaned from their background sources as “common knowledge,” they may sometimes leave these sources uncited.

**Exhibits or Exhibit Sources:** Materials a writer offers for explication, analysis, or interpretation. Materials used as background, argument, or method sources tend to be prose texts, but anything that can be represented in discourse can potentially serve as an exhibit. The simplest sort of exhibit is the example, a concrete instance offered to illustrate some more general claim or assertion. The term exhibit encompasses but is not synonymous with the conventional term evidence, which designates data offered in support of a claim. Exhibits can lend support to claims (facts offered in support of a claim can be classified as exhibits), but exhibits can also provide occasions for claims. Complex exhibits can demand extensive framing and interpretation. Understood in this way, the exhibits in a piece of writing work much like the exhibits in a museum or a trial. Good writers, like good curators and lawyers, know that rich exhibits may be subjected to multiple and perhaps even conflicting “readings.” They know they must do rhetorical work to establish their exhibits’ meanings and significance.

**Arguments or Argument Sources:** Materials whose claims a writer affirms, disputes, refines, or extends in some way. To invoke a common metaphor, argument sources are those with which writers enter into “conversation.” In professional academic writing, there is a strong correlation between the genres in which writers work and the genres of their argument sources, but this correlation is weaker in student writing. In the ordinary practice of their professions, historians generally write articles and books that engage articles and books by other historians; neuroscientists generally write research reports that engage research reports by other neuroscientists. Students are not regularly asked to write papers that engage other student papers. This “genre gap” may be a significant reason students sometimes fail to apprehend the dialogic nature of academic argumentation.

**Method or Theory Sources:** Materials from which a writer derives a governing concept or a manner of working. (For my purposes, method and theory are synonymous. The former term is more amenable to scientific disciplines, the latter for humanities disciplines.) A method or theory source can offer a set of key terms, lay out a particular procedure, or furnish a general model or perspective. Since methods, like background knowledge, are often communal, they can sometimes go uncited. It is not unusual for writers to acknowledge their most important method or theory sources only obliquely, by deftly dropping a recognizable name, using a particular terminology, or adopting a prose style or mode of exposition that affilates them with a particular school of thought. Likewise, especially influential concepts or methods may enter into the general parlance of disciplines or professions and so lose their ties to specific sources.

BEAM/BEAT’s main advantage over the standard nomenclature is that it allows us to describe writers’ materials straightforwardly in terms of what writers do with them: writers rely on background sources, interpret or analyze exhibits, engage arguments, and follow or invoke theory sources.
BEAM/BEAT Teaching Ideas

“The Four Food Groups”: Good papers, like good diets, have the right balance. Mostly exhibits, some arguments to respond to, appropriate background, and perhaps some theory/methods if those need to be explained or acknowledged explicitly. Students can use BEAM to see whether their papers are on a “balanced diet.”

Rubric for planning papers, assignments, and syllabi: Students can use BEAM/BEAT to plan their papers; teachers can use BEAM/BEAT to plan their assignments and courses. Students need a proper “mix” of sources to write effectively; teachers need to give their students a “mix” of sources that will allow students to do the work teachers want them to do.

- **Source Map**: Students can map the sources/data they are using in their papers; teachers can map the sources/data they are assigning in their syllabi. Use squares for sources/data that are intended as background, triangles for sources/data intended as exhibits, circles for sources intended as argument sources, diamond for sources intended as theory sources. Then use lines to show intertextual relationships.

- **Four-Column Bibliography**: List sources for a paper, assignment, or course in four columns.…

**Game: “Use it as a…”**: Students (and teachers also) sometimes fail to grasp a crucial element of this taxonomy: that it describes uses to which sources are put, not kinds or genres. There is nothing intrinsic to a source or body of data that makes it background, exhibit, argument, or method/theory. One might, for example, write a response to President Obama’s convention address (treating it as an argument) or one might write a close reading of it (treating it as an exhibit). This in-class exercise invites students to play with this idea: Write “background,” “exhibit,” “argument,” and “theory,” respectively, on four index cards. A student draws a card and has to use a source or piece of data from the class in a sentence in the way specified on the card. Variation: have students work in groups and do this exercise in writing. Then talk about the particular “moves” students make to signal that they are using a source a particular way.

**Framework for Reading**: Have students annotate secondary readings use BEAM/BEAT. Ask students to label each use of a source or data in the reading as B, E, A, or M/T. If there are borderline cases or disagreements, discuss.

**Framework for Planning Research**: Have students use BEAM/BEAT to plan their research. In what ways will they need to use sources/data in their papers? List these and develop a plan for finding materials that can fulfill these roles. Here is a **Rule of Thumb**: If the starting-point is an exhibit, find arguments to engage; if the starting-point is an argument, find exhibits to analyze.

**Annotated Bibliographies**: Have students produce annotated bibliographies in which they use BEAM/BEAT to say how they anticipate using a source or body of data in their papers.

**Talking About Transfer**: Have students use BEAM/BEAT to compare the ways in which texts from different disciplines treat sources and data. This exercise works with both professional documents and student writing. Have students find correlations and differences. (In other words, use BEAM/BEAT to facilitate a comparative genre analysis.)