Writing and Genres

Writing gives you the power to get things done with words and images. It allows you to respond successfully to the events and people around you, whether you are trying to improve your community, pitch a new idea at work, or just text with your friends.

The emergence of new writing situations—new places for writing, new readers, and new media—means writing today involves more than just getting words and images onto a page or screen. Writers need to handle a wide variety of situations with diverse groups of people and multiple technologies. Learning to navigate among these complex situations is the real challenge of writing in today's world.

What Are Genres?

In this book, you will learn how to use writing genres to interpret these complex situations and respond to them successfully. Defining the word genre is difficult. Mistakenly, genres are sometimes defined by their structure alone (e.g., "A report has five parts: introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion"). But this understanding of genre is a bit misleading. Genres are not fixed or rigid patterns to be followed mechanically. They are not forms into which we insert sentences and paragraphs.

Genres are ways of writing and speaking that help people interact and work together. In other words, genres reflect the things people do, and they are always evolving because human activities change over time to suit new social situations and new challenges. Genres do offer somewhat stable patterns for responding to typical situations. More importantly, though, they reflect how people act, react, and interact in these situations. Genres are meeting places—and meaning places.

Up until now, your writing courses have probably taught you how to master one genre—the academic essay—and write for one kind of reader—your teachers. In college, you will need to master and write in a variety of genres that help you to achieve different kinds of goals. This book will help you develop this "genre know-how," which you can use to strengthen your writing in college courses and in your career. You will also master a useful "genre set" that will allow you to respond successfully to a variety of important situations.

With this book, you will learn how to recognize and adapt genres for your own needs. You will become a more agile writer with a greater awareness of the differences among readers and contexts. You will become more proficient at analyzing specific writing situations and at adapting your writing to them.

Using Genres to Write Successfully

For writers, genres offer flexible approaches to writing that reflect how people in communities interact with each other. They provide strategies for analyzing and interpreting what is happening around you. Once you understand your current situation, you can then use genres to focus your creativity, generate new ideas, and present those ideas to others. You can use words and images to mold reality to your advantage.

Readers use genres, too. They use them as guideposts to orient themselves to a text, helping them to anticipate what they are likely to find in the document and how they can use the information in it. Readers are never passive spectators. They bring specific expectations with them and they respond to your writing, in part, according to those expectations. As a writer, when you understand what your readers expect to find, you can make strategic choices about what information you will include and how you will present your ideas (Figure 1.1). Knowing what your readers expect of a particular genre gives you insight about how to compose your text. It gives you power.

Writing with Genres

As a writer, you can use a genre to help you make sense of a complex situation, invent your ideas, and write a text that achieves your purpose and meets the expectations of your readers. Here are the most important things to remember about genres:

Genres Are Flexible. Genres are as flexible and changeable as the human activities they represent. It is helpful to...
should be viewed as flexible and adaptable to the evolving reality around you.

Genres Adjust to Fit Various Situations. When the audience or context changes, a genre needs to be adjusted to suit the new situation. An argument that worked previously with some readers or in a particular context might not work with different readers or in another context.

Genres Evolve to Suit Various Fields. Each discipline adapts common genres to its own needs and purposes. A report written by a biologist, for example, will share many characteristics with a report written by a manager at a corporation, but there will also be noticeable differences in the content, organization, style, and design of the text.

Genres Shape Situations and Readers. When you choose a particular genre, you are deciding what kinds of issues will be highlighted and what role your readers will play. For instance, readers know that when they encounter a memoir (a type of literary genre), they should read thoroughly and follow the story line. Quite differently, when readers encounter a report (a workplace genre), they assume they can "raid" the text for the specific information they need, that is, they can skip and skim.

Genres Can Be Played With. You can be creative and play with the conventions of genres. Can you use a memoir to review a book? Can you use a rhetorical analysis to study a painting? Sure you can. Genres are stretchy. But if you are going to go against your readers' expectations of the genre, you need to do so consciously and for a specific purpose.

Genres in Movies

You are already very familiar with the concept of genres in media and entertainment. To illustrate how genres work, let's take a look at how they function in the movie industry. Movies can be sorted by the genres that were used to make them (Figure 1.2). Movie genres include romantic comedies, action flicks, documentaries, murder mysteries, musicals, science fiction and fantasy, horror, thrillers, and others. These genres aren't formulas that the writers and directors must follow. Instead, they are familiar patterns that audiences will recognize and understand.

Once the audience recognizes the genre of the movie, they form specific expectations about what kinds of things they will—and will not—experience. For example, a romantic comedy usually explores the amusing awkwardness and pratfalls of a new relationship. Two people meet and feel an attraction to each other. But then, events beyond their control keep them apart and cause humorous misunderstandings. Eventually, the two star-crossed lovers realize they truly do love each other and find a way at the end of the movie to be together.

Directors of successful romantic comedies use the boundaries and conventions of this genre to help them work creatively and produce something that is both recognizable and new. Genres aid the director's creativity by providing guidelines about how the movie should be structured, scripted, visually designed, musically scored, and even edited. Genres also constrain movies by helping directors determine what is "in bounds" and what is "out of bounds." Good directors work creatively within a genre to create something original.

Movies that flop often don't follow a recognizable genre—or even worse—formulically follow a common genre in a trite way. A movie that strictly uses a genre formulaically feels painfully predictable and shallow. The people in the audience get bored and tune out when they realize that the movie is mechanically following a genre in a predictable way.

Like successful movie directors, effective writers need to fully understand the genres they are using. Genres help writers figure out where to start and how to proceed. They allow writers to create something fresh and new, while also helping them to organize and control their message in a way that readers will recognize and comprehend. In this sense, good writers (like good movie directors) are always balancing the old, familiar, and stable with the new, creative, and dynamic.

Genre and the Writing Process

So, how can genres help you write better? Think of something you already do well. Perhaps you are a good swimmer or a solid basketball player. Maybe you are a great video game player. Do you play the guitar, or do you like to make pottery? Have you learned a martial art? Do you like to do yoga?

To do something well, you first needed to learn the process for doing it. Someone else, perhaps a teacher, coach, parent, or friend, showed you the process and helped you get better at it (Figure 1.3, page 6). Then, once you knew that process, you worked on improving and refining your skills. You gained confidence. Before long, you developed the "know-how" for that activity—not just the skill to do it, but also an ability to
be innovative and original. When you reached this point, you could then start being
creative and trying out new ideas.
Writing is similar to the other things you enjoy doing. To write well, you first need
to develop your own writing process. Strong writers aren't born with a special gift
and they aren't necessarily smarter than anyone else. Strong writers have simply
learned and mastered a reliable writing process that allows them to generate new
ideas and shape those ideas into something readers will find interesting and useful.

Using a Writing Process
A writing process is a series of steps that leads you from your basic idea to a finished
document. Over time, you will develop your own unique writing process, but the fol­
lowing six steps work well as a starting place:

- Analyze the rhetorical situation. Identify the genre you are being asked to
  use or the genre that fits the needs of your project. Then define your topic,
  state your purpose, and analyze your readers and the contexts in which your
  text will be read or used.
- Invent your ideas. Use inquiry and research to generate your own ideas and
discover what others already know about your topic.
- Organize and draft your paper. Arrange and compose your ideas into famil­
  iar patterns that your readers will recognize and find useful.
- Choose an appropriate style. Use techniques of plain and persuasive style to
  clarify your writing and make it more compelling.
- Design your document. Develop an appropriate page layout and use visuals
to make your ideas more accessible and attractive to readers.

Revise and edit your work. Improve your writing by rewriting, reorganizing,
editing, and proofreading your work.

Experienced writers tend to handle each of these steps separately, but a writing process
shouldn't be followed mechanically from one step to the next. Instead, experienced
writers tend to move around among these steps as needed (Figure 1.4). For instance,
while drafting your paper, you may find you need to invent more content. Or, while
writing, you may decide that you need to rethink the style of the text.

Why bother with a writing process at all? Can't you just write the paper? Truth is, as
projects grow more complex and important, you need to give yourself time to generate
and refine your ideas. A reliable writing process helps you do things one step at a time.
In the long run, following a writing process will save you time and will help you to write
something that is more creative and interesting to your readers.

Using Genre as a Guiding Concept
The genre you are using should influence each stage of your writing process, as
demonstrated in Figure 1.4. The genre will help you make decisions about the contents
of your paper, how your paper should be organized, what style would be appropriate,
and what kind of design would work best. Then, as you revise and edit your paper,
you can use the genre to guide any changes to the text. So as you write, keep the genre
you are following in mind. Use the genre as a source for creativity.
be innovative and original. When you reached this point, you could then start being creative and trying out new ideas.

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A writing process is a series of steps that leads you from your basic idea to a finished document. Over time, you will develop your own unique writing process, but the following six steps work well as a starting place:

- **Analyze the rhetorical situation.** Identify the genre you are being asked to use or the genre that fits the needs of your project. Then define your topic, state your purpose, and analyze your readers and the contexts in which your text will be read or used.

- **Invent your ideas.** Use inquiry and research to generate your own ideas and discover what others already know about your topic.

- **Organize and draft your paper.** Arrange and compose your ideas into familiar patterns that your readers will recognize and find useful.

- **Choose an appropriate style.** Use techniques of plain and persuasive style to clarify your writing and make it more compelling.

- **Design your document.** Develop an appropriate page layout and use visuals to make your ideas more accessible and attractive to readers.

- **Revise and edit your work.** Improve your writing by rewriting, reorganizing, editing, and proofreading your work.

Experienced writers tend to handle each of these steps separately, but a writing process shouldn't be followed mechanically from one step to the next. Instead, experienced writers tend to move around among these steps as needed (Figure 1.4). For instance, while drafting your paper, you may find you need to invent more content. Or, while revising, you may decide that you need to rethink the style of the text.

Why bother with a writing process at all? Can't you just write the paper? Truth is, as projects grow more complex and important, you need to give yourself time to generate and refine your ideas. A reliable writing process helps you do things one step at a time. In the long run, following a writing process will save you time and will help you to write something that is more creative and interesting to your readers.

Using Genre as a Guiding Concept

The genre you are using should influence each stage of your writing process, as shown in Figure 1.4. The genre will help you make decisions about the content of your paper, how your paper should be organized, what style would be appropriate, and what kind of design would work best. Then, as you revise and edit your paper, you can use the genre to guide any changes to the text. So as you write, keep the genre you are following in mind. Use the genre as a source for creativity.
CHAPTER 1 Writing and Genres

For example, if you are writing a movie review, the "review genre" (discussed in Chapter 6, "Reviews") will help you make decisions about what kinds of information your readers will expect. Should you tell them the plot of the movie? Should you describe the characters? Should you give away the ending? The genre will provide you with a model organization, so you can arrange your ideas in a pattern that your readers will expect. The genre also helps you to make informed decisions about what kind of style and design would work.

The purpose of a genre is to help you figure out how people tend to act, react, and interact in the situation in which you are writing. So if you tell your readers you are giving them a "movie review," they will have some expectations about the content, organization, style, and design of that text. If you meet those expectations, they will probably find the review useful and easy to read. If you bend those expectations, they might find your review creative or unique. However, if you completely violate their expectations for a movie review, your readers will likely be confused or frustrated with your work.

Using Genres in College and in Your Career

This genre-based approach to writing might be new to you. It's the next step toward learning how to write for college and in your future career. You already have a good sense about how the "essay genre" is used, and you know what your professors, as readers, expect from academic essays. Now that you are in college, you will need to master and write in a variety of genres that allow you to achieve new goals. You need to learn how to write for advanced college courses and workplace situations in which the academic essay is no longer suitable.

This book will help you develop genre know-how, the practical knowledge and skill to write effectively with genres. You will learn how to recognize and adapt genres for your own needs, and you will learn how to use your genre know-how to adjust to unique situations and specific readers. This book will help you to become a versatile, flexible, and agile writer. You will learn how to analyze specific writing situations and then take action with words and images.

At the end of each chapter in this book, you will find something called the "Quick Start Guide." The purpose of the Quick Start Guides is to help you get up and running as soon as possible. You can use these guides for review or to preview the essential information in the chapter. Here is the essential information in this chapter.

KNOW What a Genre Is
Genres are ways of writing and speaking that help people communicate and work together in specific situations. Genres offer relatively stable patterns for writing, but more importantly, they reflect how humans act, react, and interact in everyday situations. Genres are meeting places—and meaning places.

GET Some "Genre Know-How"
Genre know-how is the ability to use genres to analyze and interpret what is happening around you. When you have genre know-how, you can use genres to focus your creativity, generate new ideas, and present those ideas to others.

KEEP in Mind That Genres Are Flexible
Genres are as flexible and changeable as the human activities they represent. They need to be adjusted to suit evolving situations. They can be stretched and messed around with, to a degree.

DEVELOP Your Writing Process
A writing process is a series of steps that leads you from your basic idea to a finished document. Developing and refining your writing process will save you time and effort in the long run.

USE Genres in College and in Your Career
A genre-based approach to writing helps you master a "genre set" that can be used in advanced college courses and in the workplace. The genre set taught in this book will cover most of the texts you will write in college and in your career.
1. In a group, ask each person to talk briefly about his or her favorite movie genre; then, as a group, choose one of those genres to discuss. Describe the genre and its characteristics: What do all or most movies in this genre include? What kinds of characters do they have? What happens in them? Then talk about some of the best and worst movies that fit the genre. What do the best movies do well? Why do the worst movies fail?

2. In your group, brainstorm and list all the television shows you can think of. Then divide these shows into categories. What characteristics did you use to sort these shows into categories? What elements made you choose to put a show in one genre instead of another? Are there any shows that seem to stretch or bend genres, or that straddle more than one genre? If so, how do the producers of these shows bend the genres to come up with something new?

3. With your group, brainstorm and list all the restaurant genres you can think of. Then choose one restaurant genre to explore further. (For instance, one restaurant genre might be the coffee shop, which might include Starbucks, Caribou Coffee, and a variety of local coffee shops.) Describe the characteristics that all or most of the restaurants in the genre share. What guidelines signal to customers what kind of restaurant they are in? How are restaurant customers expected to behave, and how do the restaurants' characteristics encourage or require such behaviors?

4. Consider a kind of writing activity that you do frequently and are good at. It might be texting your friends, e-mailing people, working on a social networking profile, writing college application essays, or the five-paragraph essay. Write informally about the features of this writing and how those features affect the people who use this kind of writing (both writers and readers). Describe the setting of such writing (where it occurs and in what medium). Finally, describe the writing itself: What kind of content is typical, how is that content organized, what kind of language is used? In what ways does the genre determine who the participants can and cannot be?

5. Imagine that you have been asked to direct a movie that crosses two very different genres. For example, you might be asked to tell a horror story as a romantic comedy, or you might be asked to convert a historical documentary into an action flick. In a one-page paper written for your professor, explain how this merging of genres might offer some creative opportunities. What kinds of problems would it cause? Do you know any movies that do this kind of genre bending or genre merging? Are these movies successful, and do you find them entertaining?