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Addressing Genre in the Writing Center

Irene L. Clark

In an Internet posting a few years ago, a former writing teacher, having abandoned the academic life in order to raise Arabian horses, observed that the process of teaching college writing was similar in many ways to the enterprise of "dressage," a term that refers to the guiding of a horse through a series of complex maneuvers by slight movements of the hands, legs, and weight. In particular, he noted the following:

1. Get the horse to understand what it is supposed to do. This is the hardest part, since the horse has no idea what, how, or why it should do it. It is also the most critical, since the easiest way to do it—force the horse into something through discipline or fear or a device that it reacts negatively to—is also the very thing that ruins the horse for advanced dressage, where cooperation and initiative and enthusiasm from the horse is required.

2. Practice the new movement as often and in as many different situations as possible.

3. Insist that the horse perform the learned movement properly, without undue punishment and with great patience and praise.

For writing center professionals, whose work often focuses on fostering student understanding of the nature, purpose and features of college level writing and on helping students apply what they have learned in variety of academic contexts, the parallels are obvious—that is:

1. Help students understand how the goals of academic writing are achieved through a text. Simply teaching a set of arbitrary rules will not enable students to apply what they have learned to new situations that involve writing.

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2. Provide opportunities for students to practice writing and to apply their understanding to as many academically oriented writing tasks as possible.

3. Criticize students’ performance with patience and praise.

In the context of the writing center, implementing points two and three seem fairly straightforward: provide opportunities for students to practice newly acquired understanding and provide constructive non-threatening feedback on their efforts. However, it is the first point—enabling students to understand the goals of academic writing so that they can develop appropriate, thoughtful and, at least occasionally, creative responses to academic writing assignments—that is more problematic. This essay will suggest that the recent reconceptualization of genre theory offers useful possibilities for fostering student insight into the nature of academic writing, so that they can develop not only more thoughtful but also more creative responses to their writing assignments. In contrast to the view that attention to genre stifles creativity because it focuses on formalistic conventions and draws artificial boundaries, the position of this essay is that knowledge of genre offers new possibilities for helping students see writing as a social construction, enabling them to move beyond genre and ultimately make “anti-genre” moves. Because creative deviation from convention can occur only in the context of insight and awareness, helping students acquire genre knowledge in the writing center will, therefore, enable, not constrict, creativity.

The Reconceptualization of “Genre”

As a number of recent genre theorists have pointed out, the word “genre” in the past was associated primarily with concepts of form and text classifications, in particular with describing the formal features of a literary work (Bazerman, Devitt, Berkenkotter, Freedman and Medway, Miller). In a pedagogical context, this concept of genre suggested an emphasis on form, and to a certain extent, on form exclusively, because, in its most simplistic application, students were encouraged to pour content into formulaic text slots without questioning the rationale for doing so. The most notorious example of this approach is the paradigm of the five paragraph essay, which many students apply indiscriminately to any writing task they are asked to complete, without questioning why there should be five, rather than four or six paragraphs, or without examining the relationship of one paragraph to another.

Although, to some extent, the word “genre” “still bears the stigma of a shallow formulaicness and a limited vocabulary of stylistic and organizational gestures” (Bazerman 1997, 20), over the past twenty years
or so, the concept of genre has been reconceptualized in terms of function, and it is this new emphasis that has the greatest potential for pedagogical application. While recognizing that genres can be characterized by regularities in textual form and pattern, current thinking about genre perceives these regularities as indicative of a more substantive rhetorical regularity. As defined by Carolyn Miller, genre is social action that involves both situation and motive, with the term “situation” described as a “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an exigence that can be allayed through the mediation of discourse” (152).

The work of Freedman and Medway and Swales, among others, similarly recognizes that although genres can be characterized by regularities in textual form, such regularity represents “typical ways of engaging rhetorically with recurring situations” (Freedman and Medway 2), and that similarities in textual form and feature derive from an effective response to situations that “writers encounter repeatedly” (Devitt 576). Because genres arise as a result of writers responding in effective ways to recurring rhetorical situations, the new concept of genre perceives generic conventions as deriving from suitability and appropriateness, rather than from arbitrary traditions and conventions. As Devitt explains it,

Genres develop . . . because they respond appropriately to situations that writers encounter repeatedly. In principle, that is, writers first respond in fitting ways and hence similarly to recurring situations; then the similarities among those appropriate responses become established as generic conventions. (576)

To a great extent, this reconceptualized concept of genre overlaps with other theories of writing that have impacted composition and writing center pedagogy, particularly those that emphasize the rhetorical goals of text and the role of context in determining text effectiveness. Because genre theory conceives of writing as a way of responding to a specific reader (or readers) within a specific context on a specific occasion (Freeman and Medway 5), it is particularly consistent with the social constructionist privileging of context, audience, and occasion, as well as with speech act theory, which emphasizes the function of language as a way of acting in the world and the importance of context in creating meaning. However, where social constructionist theory focuses almost exclusively on the discourse community, correspondingly de-emphasizing individual ways of knowing and learning, genre theory includes “individual as well as group socialization processes” (Walker 31). Berkenkotter and Huckin define this dual focus as follows:
We use the term genre knowledge to refer to an individual’s repertoire of situationally appropriate responses to recurrent situations—from immediate encounters to distanced communication through the medium of print, and more recently, the electronic media. One way to study the textual character of disciplinary communication is to examine both the situated actions of writers and the communicative systems in which disciplinary actors participate. (ix)

I first became acquainted with genre theory when I was working at the University of Utrecht in Holland in 1989 and 1993. I was teaching writing to Ph.D. candidates in the field of Geography, who took my writing class because they wanted to be able to publish social science articles in English. These students were all high achievers within their discipline, well acquainted with the literature of their fields, and quite comfortable in speaking English. Yet most of them were unsuccessful in writing articles in English, not because of poor language skills, but because they were unfamiliar with the conventions, that is, the “genre” of scholarly articles in the social sciences. Seeking new approaches to help these students, I came upon a body of literature in the sub-specialty termed ESP, English for Special Purposes, and discovered the work of John Swales, who applied genre theory to what he terms the characteristic “moves” within a scientific article. In his 1990 book, Genre Analysis, Swales defined genre primarily by its common communicative purposes, maintaining that these purposes and the role of the genre within its environment has generated specific textual features—that is, form derives from purpose and context, not the other way around. Swales feels that a genre-centered approach to teaching would enable students to understand why a particular genre has acquired characteristic features, thereby enabling them both to produce it more effectively as well as to make informed decisions about deviating from it. In either case, Swales maintains, awareness of genre will enable students to gain insight into the nature of the texts they are assigned to produce.

I taught in Utrecht on two occasions, in 1989 and in 1993, and during the more recent period, I developed several class lessons based on Swales’ concept of genre analysis. Like many native speakers of English, the Dutch students were unaware of the necessity of selecting a problematic or controversial issue for a research article and of engaging with that issue in order to develop a main point or direction in the context of a public conversation. Hence, many of the topics they chose to write about were not suitable for a substantive scholarly article because they manifested no engagement with a problem, no argumentative edge, even though they incorporated a great deal of information. Despite the fact that these students had read and discussed the literature in their field, they had not
acquired sufficient understanding of the underlying goals of that literature and were, therefore, unable to generate a text that included the appropriate generic features. Once they understood that social science writing was a genre with an argumentative purpose achieved through particular features, and had analyzed how these features contributed to the fulfillment of that purpose, their writing improved impressively, and it was at this point that I began to think about using this approach with students in the United States.

**Genre and Creativity**

The extent to which this reconceptualization of genre can be applied in a pedagogical context has raised considerable controversy among three groups in particular: those who believe that genre can and should be taught overtly because "what you don't know won't help you" (Williams and Colomb), those who maintain that genre cannot effectively be taught because the only way that students can absorb the requirements of a genre is through immersion into the discourse community (Freedman 1993, 1997), and those who insist that genre not only cannot, but should not, be taught explicitly because it will result in the blind adherence to form that characterized the original concept of genre. This latter perspective condemns the overt teaching of genre as dogmatic, simplistic, formalistic, and tyrannical, an approach that is likely to stifle students' own unique voices and creativity in a concern for formal correctness.

This concern with the possibility of stifling student creativity through the overt teaching of genre raises a number of questions not only about the relationship of form and textual requirements to creativity but also about what we really mean when we characterize a student essay as "creative." What distinguishes an essay labeled dull and ordinary from one that is considered interesting and creative? If students are made aware of genre constraints, will their creativity then be stifled? And, at the other extreme, if students are encouraged to write their essays in any way they wish, without having to adhere to any particular generic characteristics, will their writing then be more "creative" and therefore "better" in some way?

Bakhtin's dialogic concept of genre offers insight into these questions. Arguing that no one creates a genre out of nothing, Bakhtin maintains that although genres may be characterized by relatively stable conventions, individuals have the power to emphasize these conventions in different ways, thus rendering them original. Genres are "filled with the echoes and reverberations of others' utterances" (89), Bakhtin points out, and therefore the concept of "voice" and the concept of genre are not
oppositional to one another. In fact,

The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them . . . the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the unrepeatable situation of communication. (80)

A number of scholars have expressed similar views (see Christie, Devitt, Peters, Brooke and Jacobs). In a 1997 presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, David Bleich suggested that genre knowledge is a necessary prerequisite to creativity because genres become more effective when the formal properties are altered slightly, giving them new life through the incorporation of the personal. Bleich argues that although students must ultimately be able to adapt genres to their own lives and lived experiences, they will be unable to make an informed or creative adaptation if they are unaware of what these genres are. Similarly, Christie argues that genre enables choice and that "choice is enhanced by constraint, made possible by constraint" (cited in Devitt 1997, 53), and Devitt (1997) maintains that "meaning is enhanced by both choice and constraint . . . in genre no less than in words" (53) and that "within any genre, there is a great deal of 'free' variation" (52). Taking this idea one step further, Peters argues that genre knowledge helps students to conceptualize not only within genres but actually to go beyond them, and Brooke and Jacobs maintain that genre "gives birth, it midwives, it makes possible. It leads us on as writers into new discoveries, new worlds, new interpretations" (215).

This presumed interrelationship between genre and creativity suggests that in order for any piece of writing to be considered creative, it must retain at least some of the characteristics that make it what it is supposed to be—that is, for a student text to be considered a creative academic "essay," it must first be recognizable as an academic essay, as opposed to some other genre, such as a "story." What makes such an essay "creative" is that it has pushed across boundaries associated with the essay in the interest of originality; however, some remnants of these boundaries must be present in order for creativity to occur. A work is regarded as "creative" when boundaries are transcended in an original and unusual way, so that the work represents a unique union of both constraint and choice. Creativity, then, can exist only within boundaries. Mozart had to work within the sonata form before he could impose his own genius upon it, just as Picasso's immersion in an established tradition of form and color enabled the resulting transformative juxtapositions. Because creativity rattles established certitudes, it cannot occur in a formless world, a world in which there are no certitudes, suggesting that genre awareness in the
context of the writing class, rather than suppressing or inhibiting student creativity, is likely to enable opportunities for creative variation. As Bakhtin points out,

Where there is style, there is genre. The transfer of style from one genre to another not only alters the way a style sounds under conditions of a genre unnatural to it, but also violates or renews the given genre. (66)

Those in favor of the overt teaching of genre argue that helping students acquire genre knowledge will broaden student understanding of what motivates the production of a particular type of text so that they can develop and ultimately elaborate on appropriate response strategies. They point out that being able to produce an example of a genre is not just a matter of generating a text with certain formal characteristics, but one of using generic resources to respond effectively and appropriately to a situation that requires the production of a text. Meta-awareness of genre, then, can enable students to work with generic conventions in multiple contexts.

**Genre and Literacy**

In the writing center (and in the classroom as well), the concept of genre has important implications for promoting academic literacy. In this context, Ann Johns (1997) has developed what she characterizes as an “exploratory, student-centered, and ‘socioliterate’ approach to teaching genre” which involves asking students to be “researchers on genres as literacy practices, rather than apprentices to genres as received rhetorical forms” (Oliver 3). Viewing genre as a subject of research, Johns’ students examine everyday texts in terms of genre, interview people who work regularly with a particular genre, and research the history and function of the genres required in their own academic writing. For Johns, genre becomes a means of fostering “socioliterate awareness” and of acknowledging the social construction of discourses (Johns 14).

During writing center tutorials, genre awareness can provide a useful framework for discussing a number of problematic issues in academic writing that are particularly troublesome for inexperienced writers, enabling them to understand, deconstruct, and creatively expand upon the requirements of their writing assignments. Such an approach is not incompatible with a process or collaborative approach, nor does it mean “the end of pre-writing, drafting or personal choice of topic. But it does mean confronting the social in writing” (Oliver 3), focusing on the “relationship between the writer and his or her ways of anticipating and
countenancing the reactions of the intended readership” (Swales 1990, 220). Working with the concept of genre is thus not simply a matter of form; rather it requires an engagement with discourse communities and an “acculturation into conventions, and (crucially) negotiations with them and transformations of them in practice” (Oliver 6).

Moreover, attention to genre has particularly important implications for assisting the marginalized student populations that writing centers are so well-suited to help and, in fact, for whom they were originally instituted. As writing centers developed during the seventies and eighties, one of their most significant goals was to provide assistance for students whose backgrounds and cultures had not prepared them for the writing they were expected to be able to do in their college classes—the “Basic Writers” with whom Mina Shaughnessy worked so thoughtfully and energetically at the City University of New York, for example. Shaughnessy’s work, though sympathetic to these students’ difficulties, emphasized the importance of finding a pattern of error—a direction that in some early writing centers was manifested through a “skill and drill” approach. But another pedagogical direction, one with which early writing centers were also closely connected, involved a rejection of “correctness” in all of its manifestations and a corresponding emphasis on expressivism and on the importance of helping students “discover” their own “voice.” In the writing center literature that flowered during these years, a policy of strict non-interventionism emerged, one that cautioned tutors not to assume too important a role in the conference, to disdain the authoritative stance, and to allow students the right to their own language. By implication, this emphasis excluded the concept of genre deeming it as overly directive, authoritarian, and formalist.

However, although the process movement and the corresponding emphasis on expressivism has resulted in some important insights into writing pedagogy—notably, that people learn to write not by completing decontextualized exercises, but by writing, revising, and receiving non-threatening feedback—it has resulted in only limited success in those groups that it was originally intended to help. According to several critics associated with the genre-based curriculum in Sydney, a strict emphasis on process, with its corresponding privileging of personal voice, has actually served “to sustain the powerlessness of children and preserve the class divisions in western culture” (Martin, qtd. in Richardson 55). Those involved in the Australian curriculum, argue that

many working class, migrant and Aboriginal children have been systematically barred from competence with those texts, knowledges, and “genres” that enable access to social and material resources. The culprits, they argue, are not limited to traditional pedagogies that disregard children’s cultural and linguistic
resources and set out to assimilate them into the fictions of mainstream culture. But the problem is also located in progressive “process” and “child-centered” approaches that appear to “value differences but in so doing leave social relations of inequality fundamentally unquestioned.” (Cope and Kalantzis vii)

Contributors to Cope and Kalantzis’s book The Power of Literacy: A Genre Approach to Teaching Writing maintain that an expressivist pedagogy and the concept of personal voice has ironically promoted a situation in which only the brightest middle-class children, who are already acquainted with the genres of privilege, will be able to learn the genres that are necessary for social and, ultimately, economic success. In order to address the needs of historically marginalized groups, they argue, educators need to understand that a more explicit teaching of genre is not incompatible with helping students acquire a workable writing process and that a more directive approach may be more successful in helping students acquire unfamiliar genres. In fact, Cope and Kalantzis claim that “students from historically marginalised groups . . . need explicit teaching more than students who seem destined for a comfortable ride into the genres and cultures of power” (8). This is a perspective that has important pedagogical implications for the writing center.

To illustrate possibilities for using this approach, I will focus on two text genres frequently encountered in the writing center: the argumentative essay and the narrative essay.

A Genre Approach to Argumentation

The burgeoning of college argumentation textbooks attests to the extent to which the argument essay has become a staple of the composition curriculum, the presumption being that much of the writing assigned at the university, the “genre” of writing that is frequently referred to as “academic discourse,” is, to a great extent, a form of argumentation. In her examination of student essays from the perspective of genre, Freedman observes that most academic essays place emphasis “on presenting a claim and clarifying its implications by pointing extensively to the grounds or specific facts relied on” (183), noting, however, that law essays constitute an exception. Similarly, Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey note that academic argument may be “more unified than is commonly understood and far more unified than the fragmentation of academic fields might imply” (4). Although it must be recognized that disciplines work in different ways to create knowledge, that each discipline is characterized by particular
modes and structures, and that discourse communities are distinct in their assumptions and shared knowledge, the privileging of argumentation in the composition curriculum is based on the idea that many of the approaches, strategies, and skills associated with argumentation are relevant to a variety of academic writing tasks. A number of "transferable" features of argumentation are cited in the literature, among them, the privileging of discovering and supporting a thesis, the role of problem definition (MacDonald), the emphasis on reason and logic, the use of evidentials (Barton), strategies of research, the role of critical reading, as well as the metaknowledge of argumentative discourse students acquire through writing, revising, and analyzing texts. As Peter Elbow points out, although academic discourse is subject to both personal and disciplinary constraints, the "essence" of academic discourse may be defined in terms of a "stance or a way of relating to our material that reaches across the differences between disciplines" (Elbow 140). In his search for what he refers to as "academic writing in general—a generic Stop and Shop brand of academic discourse that lies beneath all these different trade names" (140)—Elbow focuses on the following characteristics:

What would seem central to such a conception of academic discourse is the giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences: being clear about claims and assertions rather than just implying or insinuating; getting thinking to stand on its own two feet rather than leaning on the authority of who advances it or the fit with who hears it. In describing academic discourse in this general way, surely I am describing a major goal of literacy, broadly defined. Are we not engaged in schools and colleges in trying to teach students to produce reasons and evidence which hold up on their own rather than just in terms of the tastes or prejudices of readers or how attractively they are packaged? (140)

Students, however, often experience difficulty with this type of writing, not only because they are unfamiliar with academic discourse, but also because professors often do not present their assignments in an argumentative context, explaining them in terms of subject, form, and length, rather than in terms of purpose. As we in writing centers know from considerable experience, a number of professors, particularly those with little background in writing pedagogy, will assign writing without being aware, themselves, that they are expecting a well-framed argument with all the accompanying constraints on the purpose, the writer, the nature of evidence, and the conceptualization of the audience that characterize writing in the academy, not to mention the subtleties of tone and voice that Elbow refers to as the "rubber-gloved quality to the voice and
register typical of most academic discourses” (144). Not having articulated their expectations, professors become aware of what they want only when they are disappointed with what they receive. (I have referred to this phenomenon as the “assign and complain” method.) And because students do not receive explicit instruction in the genre requirements of college writing, they frequently confuse argumentation with a more familiar genre, such as exposition or narrative; thus their essays frequently consist of a linear sequencing of unprocessed material in the body of the essay, with analysis and commentary, if it exists at all, relegated to the concluding paragraph. We in writing centers are only too familiar with student essays that fail to engage with an issue argumentatively, consisting simply of a stringing together of the views of various authorities or a narrative of a personal experience loosely connected to the topic.

A genre perspective, however, would facilitate student understanding of argumentation, enabling them to engage more intensively and insightfully with their topics. Cope and Kalantzis point out that “a knowledge of genre and grammar” (in this context, the term “grammar” is used to refer to conventions that identify a specific genre) helps students find their “own voice” (2), enabling them ultimately to create “anti-genres”—that is, creative variations. Such a perspective would not be presented in terms of a set of text slots into which appropriate content is poured, but rather in the context of how various generic features associated with argumentation help writers achieve the social purpose of their text; such features include the type of issue addressed in the text, context within which the issue is presented, the purpose of the text, and the use of reason as the means of developing that text.

**Issue Selection, Context, Purpose, and Reason**

In terms of issue selection, a genre approach to argument would help student writers understand the importance of selecting an appropriate topic for argumentation and engaging with that topic thoughtfully. Choosing and grappling with an appropriate issue is crucial to the success of an argumentative essay; without thoughtful consideration of issue and purpose at this stage of the process, students frequently fall back on formulaic writing or else may choose topics that are fundamentally unsuitable—overly simplistic, self-evident, insufficiently controversial—topics that just don’t lend themselves to the assignment, no matter how conscientiously the student might work. A genre approach to argumentation would also illuminate the rationale for other frequently misunderstood or overlooked features of argumentation, such as the necessity of acknowledging an opposing viewpoint, a component of argumentation for which students often see little use since they think that
even mentioning another viewpoint serves to weaken their own position. As Devitt points out,

Knowing the genre . . . means knowing such things as appropriate subject matter, level of detail, tone and approach, as well as the usual layout and organization. Knowing the genre means knowing not only, or even most of all, how to conform to generic conventions, but also how to respond appropriately to a given situation. (576)

In terms of context, a genre approach would identify the problematization of a topic as an important convention (Barton 717), helping students understand that a successful academic argument identifies a specific problem, assumption, idea, view or situation and engages with that problem meaningfully. As Barton points out, the essays of successful students demonstrate understanding of the rhetorical strategy of contrastive problematization, but when students are unaware of this strategy, they write papers that have no central point, consisting mainly of information “about” the topic without the engagement that breathes life into a text.

Related to “context” is the role of purpose, and here, too, a genre approach would be helpful in focusing student attention on the importance of having an impact on a reader—that is, it would help them understand that the goal of academic writing is not simply to present information, but rather to move readers to think about the reasons and evidence presented, acknowledge that the argument has merit, and then to reevaluate and modify their points of view. Of course, this approach has much in common with rhetorical perspectives, and, indeed, a useful writing center technique for helping student writers become aware of audience is for a tutor to assume the role of audience, to pretend to be the reader, sometimes a hostile or confused reader, enabling students to move beyond their involvement in their own ideas and project the potential impact of these ideas on others.

However, although focusing on purpose through genre is similar to a rhetorical approach in that both rhetorical and genre approaches privilege audience impact, a genre approach specifies the means through which audience impact must be achieved. In order for an argumentative essay to be considered effective in an academic context, the intended audience must not only be moved, it must be moved through the use of reason, and it is the use of well-conceived reasons that, by definition, distinguishes academic argument from other genres, even those with the similar goal of having an effect on an audience. For example, a famous runner might write a letter to a school coach endorsing a particular brand of running shoes without citing any reasons at all; if the runner were
sufficiently well known and respected, the coach might decide to buy that brand of shoe for the school team, simply on the basis of the credibility or ethos of the writer. Or, to cite another example, a concerned member of a community might address a letter to a charitable organization describing a lonely puppy, whimpering for its mother in an animal shelter, and the organization might decide to donate money to the shelter, simply on the basis of that emotional appeal. But even though both letters might achieve their desired goals of affecting an audience, and even though ethos and pathos have their role in argumentation, neither the letter to the team nor the appeal to the charitable organization can be considered academic arguments if they don’t include clearly stated reasons. Approaching argument as a genre that, by definition, requires the use of reason to achieve its purpose can help students in the writing center assess the effectiveness of their writing because it illuminates the expectations implicit in their assignments.

**Audience and New Knowledge**

A genre approach in the writing center can also help students understand the often puzzling concept of audience, helping them figure out what information should be included in an essay as new knowledge, as opposed to what can be omitted as “common knowledge.” Distinguishing between new and common knowledge can be very confusing for students not only because they are uncertain about who their audience actually is, but also because they are frequently given ambiguous and sometimes actually contradictory advice. They are told, for instance, to “consider your audience.” Yet students know that the real audience for a piece of academic writing is the teacher, and because they assume that the teacher is already familiar with the topic, they quite logically omit information that the teacher is likely to know—such as information about background and context. The other piece of ambiguous advice students receive is to omit what might be considered “shared or common knowledge,” advice that is difficult to follow, since the knowledge students “share” is changing on a daily basis. A month ago, for example, students may not have heard of narrative theory, but now they are supposed to write as if the subject does not need explanation. Moreover, in terms of shared knowledge, students are often told “not to assume that readers know what the writer is talking about,” but also “not to tell readers what they already know.”

The difference between new and common knowledge cannot be explained with any degree of exactness, as Giltrow and Valiquette note in the context of discipline-specific criteria for shared background knowledge. However, as students become increasingly familiar with the genre
of academic writing—the more they examine examples of this genre, and the more aware they become of the features that make this genre what it is—their insight will deepen, enabling them to write as if they were insiders to the discourse community, rather than strangers who expose their unfamiliarity with opening lines such as “Shakespeare was a well-known English playwright,” or “Advertisements aim to sell products.”

Examples of Student Writing that Illustrate Faulty Understanding of Genre

Several years ago, in a writing class linked with an introductory class in Anthropology, I gave students an assignment to read an article, entitled “Sharing Christmas Dinner with the Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari,” and then to write an essay comparing the perspective on Christmas discussed in that article with customs in their own culture—in other words, an essay that compares and contrasts Christmas customs from two cultures for the purpose of developing an insightful point about customs in the two cultures. Many students responded well to this assignment, even though it had not been explained adequately in terms of its audience and purpose. However, one student read the article and then began her essay with the following question:

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have Christmas dinner with the Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari?

Such an opening line seems incongruous not only because it is unlikely that any reader would answer “yes” to such a question, but also because direct address of this type establishes a tone that seems inappropriate for a formal essay. Why did the student choose to begin her essay in this way? One explanation is that because the student was unfamiliar with the genre of academic writing, but quite familiar with the genre of advertising, she began with a generic feature that she had seen many times in the genre she knew best—the direct personal question. An advertisement for a health club, for example, might indeed begin with the question, “Did you ever wonder how she manages to keep in such terrific shape?” Moreover, that opening sentence, despite its inappropriateness, could conceivably have been part of an essay that creatively pushed the boundaries of the genre had the student understood the genre sufficiently. In such a case, the opening question could have been followed by a response such as “Probably not. However—,” thereby leading into a new perspective on, for example, the nature of present-giving or the role of ritual in different cultures. Potentially, then, the opening sentence might have served as a creative variation on the genre, one that deliberately departed from an expected feature. But
without a sense of the writer’s awareness of genre, we find that opening sentence humorously inappropriate, a mechanical transfer from one genre to another.

In the writing center, a tutor confronted with an opening sentence such as this might discuss the concept of the “opening hook” in a typical first year essay and the differences between that sort of opening and the catch phrases associated with advertising. Discussion might also challenge students to consider the effectiveness of such a hook in terms of its intended audience and encourage the student to reflect on his or her own experience of literate texts that use openings such as this one and to compare that experience with other text types. Thus, in addressing this opening statement, the writing center tutorial would focus on helping the student learn something important about opening statements in a variety of generic contexts, rather than simply relying on a formula.

The excerpt from Allison’s paper (below) exemplifies another problem many student writers have in understanding the generic requirements of argumentation:

The Fight For Homogenous Diversity

A debate has scourged the United States for several decades regarding the issue of “PC.” The abbreviation is often confused with several different meanings, such as Personal Computer, President’s Choice, but instead I am addressing the coined term “Political Correctness.” Political Correctness indicates “the need for sensitivity toward minorities and women due to past oppression against them” (Clark 343). Indeed, we constantly confront Political Correctness in everyday life as the debate becomes a more prominent topic in the classroom, the newspapers, and casual conversation.

The debate over Political Correctness has raised the question whether speech codes promoting multicultural sensitivity conflict with First Amendment rights to freedom of speech. Authors like Nat Hentoff and George Will protest avidly against Political Correctness on the premise that censorship of language will lead to thought censorship, known as “thought police.” However Stanley Fish claims that “Free speech is not an independent value but a political prize” (377).

In this excerpt, it becomes apparent that although Allison has chosen a controversial issue and has indicated that she is aware of multiple points of view, she doesn’t understand that the purpose of an argumentative essay is to engage with a topic in order to develop and support a position.
or thesis. Instead, she simply summarizes the statements of several sources she has read and peppers her paper with a few quotations. One possible reason for this is that Allison really didn't understand the readings, but another is that the genre of non-fiction writing that Allison is likely to be most familiar with is the essay exam or report, both of which tend to be expository, rather than argumentative. Like the student who was writing about the Kung Bushmen, Allison was unfamiliar with the genre of her assignment so she fell back on a genre with which she was more familiar. Allison's paper also suggests that she was confused about what should and shouldn't be considered common knowledge and, correspondingly, what should and shouldn't be cited. Although she cites authors such as Nat Hentoff, George Will, and Stanley Fish in order to indicate the nature of the controversy, she also uses a citation in her definition of PC, which seems unnecessary because it is "shared knowledge."

A genre approach to revising this paper in the writing center would focus Allison's attention on the purpose and context of her paper, enabling her to understand the function and underlying values of an academic essay. Crucial to a tutorial concerned with this paper is the tutor's ability to help Allison explore the rationale behind discourse conventions, not just present them as necessary formulae. The tutor might ask questions such as "Who cares about this topic?"; "What is the problem you are addressing?"; "How will you convince a literate audience to consider your perspective?"; or, "What expectations is this audience likely to have?" Such questions would enable Allison to reflect on how genre helps to achieve purpose, thereby demystifying the nature of the writing task and helping her to connect the assigned readings with her paper.

Charles' paper (below) indicates confusion about the purpose of another genre frequently assigned in college classes—the "comparative review":

A Comparative Review

This comparative review begins with an article by Michael French. His article discusses the over capacity in a mass production industry and the basic workings of an oligopolistic competition under economic situations. Dr. French reflects his view to the public in his article from the Business History Review which is entitled, "Structural Change and Competition in the United States Tire Industry, 1920-1939." His article discusses the tire industry and from this article he attempts to set forth his ideology for the reader to comprehend. Dr. French based some of his article on data gathered from Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business.
Dr. French goes on to describe the different managerial styles American industries were faced with. He then presents a point-by-point structure of the individual tire industries. He also informs the reader of the conditions these industries faced during that era.

Charles' essay describes the content of one article and then the second, suggesting that he does not understand that a comparative review uses comparison and contrast in order to distinguish and evaluate, not simply to summarize two readings. Helping Charles revise this paper in the writing center would not focus simply on a set of rules, but rather would address the purpose and origins of a comparative review and consider whose interests such a genre might serve. Enhanced understanding might enable Charles to figure out for himself that he should have referred to both articles in his introduction and to restructure his paper around points of comparison, instead of simply describing the content of each one without any apparent purpose for doing so.

The excerpt from Jos' paper (below) similarly illustrates confusion over what is "shared" as opposed to "new" knowledge in the genre of an academic article:

Ex Post Evaluation of Environmental Impact Assessment

Ex post evaluation of Environment Impact Assessment is an important and necessary part of a well-performed EIA. In this paper, this will be discussed on the basis of experiences in the Netherlands. The Dutch legislative framework is unique in that it prescribes that an ex post evaluation has to be done. First, the legislation of Environmental Impact Assessment in The Netherlands will be reviewed. Next, the ex post evaluation of EIA will be outlined. The importance of ex post evaluation for EIA will also be discussed. Further, the acquired experiences and problems in the Netherlands with evaluation of EIA will be discussed and analyzed. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made.

Jos, who was one of my students in Holland, did not view the predicted structure of a scholarly article as shared knowledge that his readers were likely to be aware of, and therefore included extraneous information in his last sentence that his intended readers are likely to know—that is, that he is writing a scholarly article that will, of course, include "some concluding remarks." A genre approach in helping Jos revise would involve explaining to him that the generic conventions of a scholarly article are presumed known, that members of the academic culture are likely to be aware of this,
and therefore, if Jos wants to be considered a member of that culture, he should not include that sentence.

Thus, in working with academic genres in the writing center, tutors can help students understand that discourse is social and that genres carry the values of the cultures that produce them. Learning to make these values visible is an important component of writing center work.

**A Genre Approach to Narrative**

Thus far I have focused on the generic features associated with academic argument, a form of writing that pertains to a great deal of the writing students are assigned in their college classes. However, there are other classroom genres that cause students problems, even those with which students are presumed familiar. In many composition classes, students are assigned to write what is referred to as a “narrative” essay, a genre that is sometimes perceived as “easier” for students to write than expository or argumentative writing because students have been listening to and telling stories all of their lives and have presumably internalized their generic features. The narrative essay is thus assigned often to beginning or remedial writers; yet what is sometimes overlooked in these assignments is that students are often unaware of how generic features contribute to what is considered to be effective narrative.

To illustrate this problem, I will cite the example of a student I had in one of my classes a number of years ago, when I included the “narrative essay” as an assignment. The writing prompt, “Write a narrative essay about an incident that made you think,” was standard at the time, and in presenting the assignment, I emphasized the role of students’ own lived experiences in constructing lively narrative and the importance of making the reader see, hear, and feel all that was being narrated. Although I no longer have a copy of this student’s actual essay, the narrative sequence of this essay is summarized below:

I heard that one of my friends was in an automobile accident.  
I needed to visit my friend in the hospital.  
I was afraid to visit him because I didn’t know what I would see.  
I put off the visit as long as I could and then, finally, I drove to the hospital feeling very nervous.  
I went into the hospital lobby feeling a knot in the pit of my stomach.  
I asked the receptionist where my friend’s room was. She told me it was on the third floor.  
I rode up in the elevator feeling almost sick.  
I approached my friend’s room dragging my feet.
I put my hand on the doorknob and turned it very slowly. There was my friend all in bandages. His face was discolored and he almost didn’t look like my friend. But I started talking to him and I was glad that I could cheer him up a bit.

At this point in the essay, the student takes leave of her friend, states, “I left the hospital feeling a great sense of relief, glad that I had come,” and moves toward her conclusion, which, one would predict on the basis of genre expectations, would affirm the importance of conquering one’s fears. However, that was not the point that was made in the conclusion to this essay. Rather, in examining how this incident had “made her think,” the student notes the following insight: “From that day on, I am really careful whenever I drive because I don’t want to wind up in an accident like my friend.”

Why is it that we feel unsatisfied by that conclusion? After all, the student had, indeed, written about an incident that had made her think. And, certainly, if we were visiting someone in the hospital who had been in an automobile accident, we might well think seriously about our own driving. One explanation is that the main point of this essay did not adhere to the generic features of what has come to be known as a narrative essay in which the starting point and the turning point must be integrally related, the turning point or narrative reversal indicating a significant change in the narrator or protagonist, a change that is intended to enlighten the reader. If we consider a narrative essay to be a type of exemplum or fable, the thesis or controlling idea must, by definition, be illustrated by the story. But in this example, the story that the student told did not illustrate the point she came to in her conclusion, even though what she narrated was probably quite true to what really happened. In this instance, the generic requirements of the narrative essay needed to be satisfied in order for us, as readers, to feel satisfied with the essay, but because this student did not understand these generic requirements, and because I had not made these requirements clear, she was unable to structure her essay in accordance with reader expectations nor develop insights that derived from the previous events.

Another, perhaps more significant, problem derives from the assignment itself, and it is here that a genre approach would also be extremely useful. As one of my reviewers pointed out, the popular narrative assignment expects students to narrate an experience that has taught them a lesson and to demonstrate selfless values, even when their actual experiences do not lend themselves so easily to these requirements. In the essay about the visit to the hospital, the student had been honest in her conclusion about how the incident had made her think, but she had not adhered to the expectations of the genre. Helping the student understand
those expectations might have enabled her to write the expected conclusion. But perhaps she might have chosen to flaunt that convention deliberately with a conclusion such as this:

On the basis of this experience, readers are probably expecting me to claim that I am now a better person because I managed to overcome my reluctance to visit my horribly injured friend. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case, at least not completely. Yes, I am glad that I managed to get through the visit and I think I was helpful to my friend. But if I had to face that ordeal again, it is likely that I would experience the very same feelings all over again. People don’t usually change on the basis of one incident, except maybe in movies or fiction. Moreover, when I emerged from that hospital into the sunlight, my first thoughts were not of my friend, but of myself and how grateful I was not to be in a similar condition. “From now on,” I thought, “I am really going to be careful about my driving.”

I cannot guarantee what grade the student would receive on an essay that concludes in this way, and, for this reason, it is unlikely that I would recommend that the student conclude the essay in this way. But by considering the potential impact of such a conclusion and the extent to which it departs from generic expectations, the student would have engaged in some valuable thinking about narrative structure and the requirements of the narrative essay. Such insight would enable her to challenge the generic expectations of the assignment she had been asked to complete.

Fostering Genre Awareness in the Writing Center

Approaching writing in terms of genre has considerable potential for expanding writing center tutors’ repertoire of pedagogical strategies, enabling students to respond more effectively and creatively to their writing assignments. In this context, I offer the following suggestions:

1. Help students understand their writing assignments in terms of genre. As Bazerman (1997) observes, “Awareness of genre not only affects the texts we ask students to produce” (23), but the questions we ask. Such questions might include the following:

   • What purpose does this genre serve?
   • What are the features of this genre?
   • How do its particular generic features serve its purpose?
   • Whose interests does this genre serve?
• How is this genre similar to and different from other text genres?
• What creative variations on this genre are likely to enhance its effectiveness?
• Which ones will be inappropriate and therefore ineffective?

2. Foster awareness of various genres, not only school genres but those in everyday life, and help students understand that “what counts as an example of a genre is historically determined and affected by social expectations” (Bazerman 1997, 21). Present unfamiliar genres in terms of more familiar ones, and encourage students to conduct what James Slevin advocates: “a critical study of academic genres, a study that questions them as well as masters them, indeed masters them by both writing within them and contextualizing them” (16).

3. Examine texts in terms of function, challenging students to resurrect the strategies implicit in the structure and relate them to the context of the situation. As Swales points out, “the rationale behind particular genre features may prove elusive, but the process of seeking for it can be enlightening . . . for both instructor and student” (7).

4. Encourage creative variation, providing opportunities for students to push generic boundaries and examine the extent to which constraint enables choice. For example, a tutor might ask a student to consider how an ad could be rewritten as an argument or an argument as an ad, thereby focusing discussion on the features appropriate to each genre and on possibilities for experimenting with new genres.

5. Help students understand the relationship of genre to discourse community, viewing genre as a form of rhetorical etiquette that, like language, enables group membership. Encourage students to discover genres with which they are familiar as well as those that push linguistic, intellectual, and social boundaries, assuring them that although their initial attempts to produce unfamiliar genres are unlikely to be successful, increased insight into genre expectations will lead to improvement.

Viewing writing through the matrix of genre offers rich potential for writing center tutors, but in order to maximize its benefit, we must “stop rejecting the teaching of genre as another version of teaching the modes and develop a more coherent pedagogy of genre” (Mirtz 197). Although such an approach is often associated simply with the analysis of texts, genres are more than texts and, as John Swales phrases it, “textual
analysis does not of itself provide a rationale of why genre texts have acquired certain features” (6). As one of the reviewers of this essay has pointed out in reference to my opening anecdote, students are a great deal smarter than horses and are capable of understanding irony and of developing linguistic and cultural meta-awareness. A genre approach in the writing center can help tutors and students understand that academic genres are not culturally neutral and that insights into these genres can generate critique of and challenge to their underlying values. Through genre, then, the writing center can foster insight, critique, and challenge, all of which are likely to contribute to student creativity.

Notes

1 This essay is written in the genre of “article in an academic journal concerned with the teaching of writing.” However, unlike many articles written in this genre, it does not contain a colon in the title.


Works Cited


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