Genre Study in Authentic Writing Instruction
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What is a genre?
Genres are commonly seen as categories of writing or as ways to classify written texts based on similar text features -- for example, historical fiction novels, op-ed articles, text messages, and newspaper feature articles. Scholars in genre studies, however, have argued that genre is more than a set of text features or conventions (Bazerman, 2004; Devitt, 2004; Miller, 1984).

Genres provide recognizable forms and familiar patterns so that speakers and writers can produce understanding across similar situations (Bazerman, 2004; Miller, 1984). When responding to a social situation, writers can be guided by past responses and can use "strategies that have commonly been used to answer situations" (Devitt, 2004, p.15). By drawing on these past responses and common strategies, "writers [can] respond more easily and more appropriately" (Devitt, 2004, p.15-16).

Genres are shaped by social situations, contexts, and activities and are used to accomplish social actions (Bawarshi, 2003; Bazerman, 2004; Devitt, 2004; Miller, 1984). According to Bazerman (2004), "genres arise in social processes of people trying to understand each other...and share meanings for their practical purposes" (p.317). Because of the social nature of genres, they do not remain fixed and stable but instead, change and evolve (Bawarshi, 2003; Devitt, 2004; Miller, 1984). Because writers write within these social situations and because variation exists among texts within a genre, student writers who are learning to write in a new genre can benefit from studying texts within the genre rather than following a formula or template.


Misconceptions & Related Research

**Misconception**: Writing instruction should focus only on writing.

**What Research Says**: When writing in a certain genre, students who read texts in that same genre develop understandings of the features, register, and conventions of that genre. When writing teachers guide students in analyzing genre features as they read, students learn more consciously about writing in that genre.

- Bartholomae (1985)
- Bazerman (2011)
Misconception: Students need to follow a formula or template to learn a new form of writing.

What Research Says: By reading and analyzing real-world, published texts, students see examples of the genre in which they are trying to write. Students learn from these real-world examples and models how to compose their own writing in that same genre. This approach acknowledges the differences that occur among pieces of writing within the same genre.

- Artemeva, Logie, & St-Martin (1999)
- Blakeslee (2001)
- Freedman & Adam (1996)
- Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau (2007)
- Riley & Reedy (2005)

Recommendations for Writing Instruction

Teaching Practice: Provide high-quality, engaging examples of the genre in which students are writing.

Reasons: Students need to spend time reading texts that are like what they are trying to write rather than only practicing writing skills. By looking at examples of the genre, students can become more informed about the kind of writing they are crafting.

- Bazerman (2011)
- Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau (2007)
- Riley & Reedy (2005)

Teaching Practice: Select mentor texts to study together. Students see models and mentors in authentic texts that they can use to craft their own pieces of writing, and teachers provide instruction in ways to notice and apply the genre patterns. As students notice ways the genre is crafted, they use this knowledge to craft their own writing. Students can take on aspects of a genre through examination of that genre rather than through the use of school-based formulas.

Reasons: Students can learn to appropriate the texts that they study and use them as models for their own writing. Students can learn about the forms, structures, and language of various genres by studying examples of those genres.

- Bawarshi (2003) [includes heuristic for how to do genre analysis]
- Bazerman (2011)
- Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau (2007)
References


Teacher Resources


Wardle, E. (2009). 'Mutt genres' and the goal of FYC: Can we help students write the genres of the university? *College Composition and Communication, 60*, 765-789.