

Writing and Genres

In this chapter, you will learn how to—

- 1.1 describe what genres are and how they help writers and readers communicate.
- 1.2 use genres to communicate with readers.
- 1.3 develop a writing process that will help you write efficiently and effectively.
- 1.4 use “genre know-how” to become a versatile writer in college and in the workplace.

Writing gives you the power to get things done with words and images. It allows you to respond successfully to the people and events around you, whether you are trying to strengthen 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 rapidly changing 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 *genres* to interpret complex situations and respond to them successfully. Defining the word *genre* is difficult. Sometimes, genres are defined by their structure alone (e.g., “A report has five parts: introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion”). But this understanding of genre is too simplistic. Genres are not fixed or rigid patterns to be followed mechanically. They are not templates into which we insert sentences and paragraphs.

1.1 describe what genres are and how they help writers and readers communicate.

Genres are ways of writing and speaking that help people interact, communicate, 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 fresh 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. They are places where writers and readers make meaning together.

Using Genres to Write Successfully

1.2 use genres to communicate with readers.

For writers, genres offer flexible patterns 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.

Readers use genres, too. For readers, genres are guideposts for orienting themselves to a text. Genres help readers to anticipate what they are likely to find in a document and how they can use the information in it. When you understand what your readers expect, you can make strategic choices about what information you will include and how you will present it (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1 College Writing requires genre Know-How

Writing matters because it is one way people get things done. College writing will teach you “genre know-how,” the ability to size up writing situations and respond to them appropriately.

Writing with Genres

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 important to know the common features of each genre, so you can use them to help you interpret new social situations and then respond to them appropriately and successfully.

Genres Are Adaptable to 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 notable 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 literary genre), they should read thoroughly and follow the story line. Quite differently, when readers encounter a report (a workplace genre), they assume that 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. You can combine, blend, or even “mash up” genres into new ones. 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 familiar with the concept of genres in media and entertainment (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 audience members recognize the genre of a 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



Figure 1.2 Movie genres

Usually, moviegoers recognize the genre of a movie even before they step into the theater. Movie studios use posters and previews to help audiences know what to expect and how to interpret the movie.

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 a film that is familiar but also fresh. Genres aid the director's creativity by providing guidelines about how the movie should be structured, scripted, visually designed, musically scored, and even edited.

Movies that flop often fail to follow a recognizable genre or—even worse—they follow a common genre in a trite way. A movie that follows a genre formulaically feels painfully predictable and shallow.

Like successful movie directors, effective writers need to 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

1.3 develop a writing process that will help you write efficiently and effectively.

So, how can genres help you write better? Think of something you already do well. 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). 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 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

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. 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.

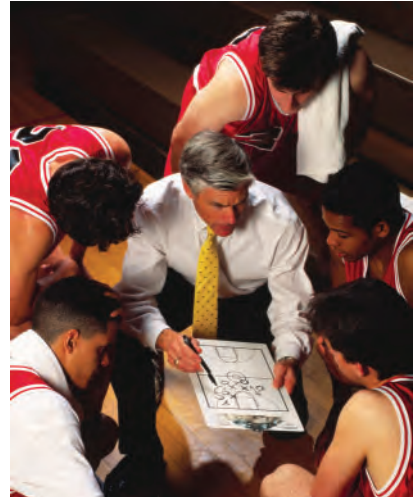


Figure 1.3 Learning to Do Something Involves Learning a Process

In order to do something you enjoy, you first had to learn a step-by-step process for doing it. Once you mastered the process and it became second nature, you could make it yours by refining and adapting it.

Design your document. Develop an appropriate page layout and use visual or audio features 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).

Why bother with a writing process at all? 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 with more confidence and creativity.

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. For example, if you are writing a movie review, the “review genre” (discussed in Chapter 7, “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.

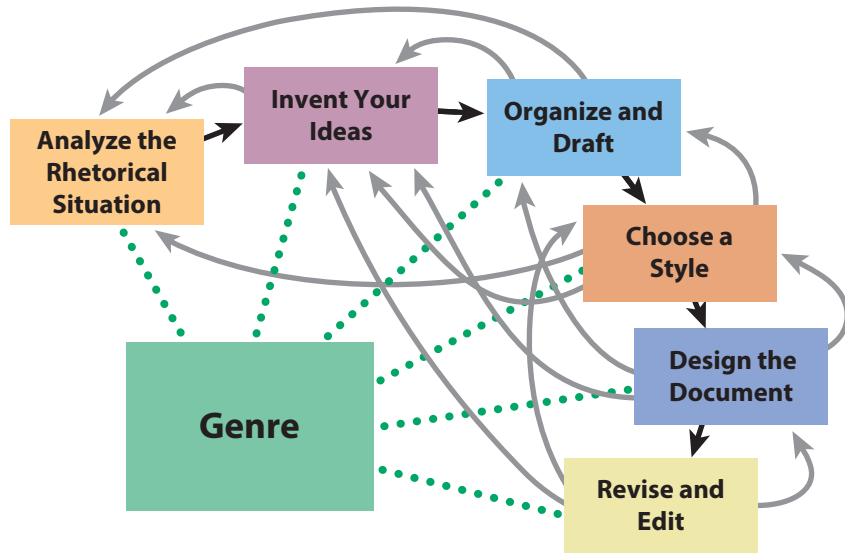


Figure 1.4 A Writing Process

Good writers tend to go through steps as they develop their work. They move among these steps in ways that fit their own work habits and personalities.

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 predictable expectations about the content, organization, style, and design of your text.

Transfer: Using Genres in College and in Your Career

1.4 use “genre know-how” to become a versatile writer in college and in the workplace.

The genre-based approach to writing might be new to you, but it’s really just the next step toward preparing you to succeed in college and in your career. By working with the genres in this book, you will develop *genre know-how*, the practical knowledge and skill to write effectively for a variety of purposes and situations. You will learn how to recognize and adapt genres for your own needs, and you will learn how to use genre know-how to adjust your writing for unique situations and specific readers.

In other words, the communication skills you learn in this book will “transfer” to your advanced classes and your career. Now is good time to begin mastering the genres you will need to be successful.

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.

LEARN “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, blended, and messed around with to fit unique situations.

DEVELOP Your Writing Process

A writing process leads you from your basic idea to a finished document, from inventing ideas to final editing. 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 will transfer to your advanced college courses and to the workplace. The genre set taught in this book will cover most of the texts you will write in college and in your career.

talk about this



1. With a group of people in your class, have each person 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 common features.
2. In your group, brainstorm and list all the television shows you can think of. Then divide these shows into genres. What characteristics did you use to sort these shows into categories? How do the producers of these shows follow and 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. How does the genre of the restaurant encourage specific kinds of behavior from its employees and its customers?

try this Out



1. On the Internet, find a Web page or Web site that conforms to a familiar Web site genre. For your professor (who may not know about this genre), write a one-page document that describes the Web site and explains the genre and how it works.
2. When a movie uses the well-known features of a genre to make fun of that genre, it's called a *parody*. Write a one-page description of a movie that parodies a particular genre, the genre it makes fun of, and the features of the genre that are specifically targeted by the parody.
3. For five minutes, freewrite about your favorite movie or television show. Freewriting means just putting your pen on the paper (or your fingers on the keyboard) and writing anything that comes to mind. Then, in your group, discuss what you wrote in your freewrite.
4. Consider a kind of writing activity that you are good at (e.g., texting, e-mail, essays, short stories). 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.

- 1. Analyze a genre.** Find a longer nonfiction document that seems to be using a specific genre. Write a three-page analysis in which you describe the document's content, organization, style, and design.
- 2. Review a movie for a Web site or blog.** Write a three-page review of a movie you saw recently to post on a blog or movie review Web site. In your review, identify the genre of the movie and the common characteristics of that genre. Then, show your readers how the movie exhibited those characteristics. Toward the end of your review, tell your readers whether you thought the movie was good by discussing how well it worked within its genre.

Go to **MyWritingLab** to complete this chapter's exercises and test your understanding of its objectives.

Write
this

