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Writing in a Genre



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Why Genres Matter

Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call speech genres.

—Mikhail Bakhtin,
Speech Genres and Other Essays

The larger your site grows, the more pressure you get from your software, your visitors, and yourself to write generically.

When thousands of pages are being posted every month, the content management software demands that each object of a certain type have the same internal structure, containing the same components in the same order. Why? Because that generic approach to organization will:

- Allow the software to assemble components on the fly, as needed
- Guarantee consistency since each object of a particular type has the same structure
- Speed up searches for content, as the software climbs down the predetermined hierarchy, ignoring branches that do not contain the target objects
- Allow the site team to offer customized content to niche audiences (a manager gets these three pieces, but a worker gets only one of them)
- Allow individuals to make personal selections of the content they really want

But to make all this assembling, searching, reusing, customizing, and personalizing go smoothly, you, as the writer, must work within the confines of a genre.

A genre is a familiar pattern, a way of organizing information that has become so common that readers will probably recognize each new instance as belonging to the genre, such as a catalog, a romance novel, or a FAQ.

In fact, visitors generally prefer that you write in recognizable forms, because as soon as they spot the genre, they can anticipate the information you'll be providing, the basic structure, and the point of view you will probably adopt. All that advance preparation helps them absorb your material, move around in it successfully,

and remember what they read because they can associate the new info with a pattern they already know. Think of how many people go to horror movies knowing what will happen when the innocent girl goes into the dark room. Audiences enjoy knowing roughly what they will get and getting it. Basically a genre makes a promise to the user, and as you write, you have to fulfill that contract.

Of course, writing in a genre seems constricting at first, because it imposes a set organization on your material. Once you internalize the model, though, you begin to work faster. For instance, when you uncover a new fact, you know right away where to put it. When you edit, you know the purpose of each component, and can quickly spot information that is off target, and shift it to the right spot. You become ruthlessly efficient as you tweak individual phrases, because you are clear, at the start, about your stance. Knowing what you are doing tends to make the writing flow.

If you are about to write in an established genre, ask yourself:

- What's the point? Each genre has a widely acknowledged purpose, addressing some particular need, question, or wish, in your target audiences.
- How's it organized? A genre tends to have a standard structure, with predefined components appearing in a certain order.
- What's the right style? With a few variations, a genre tends to dictate a style, by convention.
- Who am I in this context? A genre comes with an expected persona—that is, a character you are supposed to adopt as the writer, indicating your stance toward your readers.

To succeed in writing within a genre you have to recognize, follow, and test these conventions. The best way to grapple with the genre is to look back at why and how it was originally invented.

A genre is born as a response to an audience's questions, needs, wishes, fantasies

Writers don't start genres, audiences do.

A niche audience starts the conversation by asking a certain kind of question over and over in the same general context. For instance, newspaper editors tend to ask, "What's the news item

The conversational model points up the fact that writing occurs within the context of previous writing and advances the total sum of the discourse.

—Charles Bazerman,
Constructing Experience

here? When can I release this? Who can I call for more info?” In response, publicists came up with the generic press release, a fairly standard approach to answering those questions in a methodical way, with a heading, release date, and contact phone number. Through the ongoing virtual conversation between editors and flacks, a peculiar type of text developed—a genre.

A genre starts with thousands of texts created by individual writers in response to real or imagined requests from a group, attempting to resolve some of their anticipated problems, to address their needs, or to appeal to some of their passions. As more people write the same type of text, the audience and the writers begin to recognize a pattern emerging—a new genre.

A genre has a conventional structure

One way to understand the purpose of a genre is to figure out what type of question it answers. For instance, here are some questions that have provoked earlier generations of writers to develop certain genres:

- How do I do x? **Procedure**
- What does x mean? **Definition**
- How is the company doing? **Annual report**
- What is your original idea? **Academic essay**
- What can you do for my organization? **Resume**
- What’s the real crime here, and how will it be solved?
Detective novel

Once the audience has gotten your attention with a broad question, and persuaded you to write in a particular genre in response to that question, you discover that, buried inside that larger question the audience may have a whole set of follow-up questions, which come up in a certain order. In fact the follow-up questions often fall into a nested hierarchy. For instance, within the basic question, “How do I do this?” (which we reply to with a procedure) are smaller questions such as, “What tools do I need to get ready?” and “What should my work look like now?”

In response to questions like these, writers have come up with tool lists (“You need a Phillips head screwdriver”) and illustrations inside the steps (“Insert Tab A into Slot B”). So the procedure, as a

genre, has a set of components that must be included and convention—the rough agreement of thousands of writers over many years—dictates a certain way of organizing those components.

For instance, to be a procedure, a text must include at least one instruction, which is a step the reader should take. That step answers the key question, “What do I do next?”

But a procedure may also contain other elements, each of which addresses a particular question the reader might ask in this context. Here are some of the follow-up questions that may lead to particular pieces of a procedure:

- What should I know before I start? **Introduction**
- What’s the point? **Goal**
- When should I do this? **Context**
- What tools do I need? **Tool list**
- Is there anything I should do before I start? **Prerequisites**
- What’s the basic idea here? **Conceptual overview**
- How does this task fit into the larger process I am working on? **Process diagram**
- What do I do next? **Step**
- What should I watch out for? **Warning**
- What did that term mean, in the step? **Definition**
- Can you give me a hint? **Tip**
- Now that I’ve done what you said to do, what’s the result?
Result statement
- Do my results match yours? **Illustration**
- What’s that strange gizmo in the corner of the illustration? **Callout**
- What does this picture show? **Caption**
- Could you give me an example of the way this step is supposed to work? **Example**
- I did what you said, but it didn’t work: now what?
Troubleshooting

You can see that these questions—and the elements that carry your responses—follow a rough sequence. If you were creating a diagram of a generic procedure, you might draw a nested hierarchy, indicating which elements were optional, and which were required and in what order—a document type definition for the

genre. In fact genres are informal analogies of the content models you create for XML delivery.

A genre acts as a general model, an uncodified but widely acknowledged structure, with an implied style. Each writer, through pressure, inspiration, or laziness, will twist the model a little, to fit a particular context. But even with these variations, writers expect that visitors should recognize that the text is following an established convention with a familiar structure.

A genre has an agreed-upon tone

If you're writing a webzine opinion piece, you may feel obliged to include some embarrassingly intimate personal details, a strong emotional appeal, and a sprinkling of intriguingly irrational exclamations. You're adapting your tone to the genre. But if you're writing a procedure, you are probably going to write in a neutral, almost flat voice, ordering readers about with corporate authority. Each genre has its expected style.

You could write a procedure in prose that is emotionally lush, but you would be moving toward the boundary of the genre. When you write a FAQ, for instance, you know what tone is expected because you have read a bunch of them.

Sure, you can stretch the style, and you should. Adapt the tone for the particular audience, their tasks, goals, and dreams. Press to include your own observations, feelings, attitudes, because you are on the Web, and you are aspiring to actual one-on-one contact with another individual. But recognize that a genre's style has its own boundaries.

The formalist always insists that you should maintain the conventional tone in any genre. But really your job is just to figure out what that conventional tone is, then bend it, twist it, and expand it, taking it right up to the limit. The limit is that break point after which you are no longer writing within the genre—you have entered the realm of parody, pastiche, or joke. OK, but at that point you are probably no longer responding to the audience's original question.

To write a genuine, familiar, or truly English style is to write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command or choice of words or who could discourse with ease, force and perspicuity setting aside all pedantic or oratorical flourishes.

—William Hazlitt

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.

—Oscar Wilde

The brain is the neurological repository of the human past, and personae are the hidden masks of our ancestors and heirs.

—Camille Paglia,
Sex, Art, and American Culture

“The writer” is a role, a subject position, constituted by community constraints.

—James Porter,
Audience and Rhetoric

A genre demands that you take on a conventional persona

Each genre comes with a few standard personas, a cast list of potential roles for you to play. For example, if you’re writing a procedure, you can give friendly explanations, or you can act as an arrogant geek; you can be expansive or tight-lipped, generous or nasty. Often, your organization, and its relationship with your audience, dictate which of the cast of characters you are to play, because a persona implies a certain kind of relationship with your audience.

You may slip into the role without much effort, or you may find it ill-fitting, out of character, and hard to assume. Your personal struggle with the persona will probably show up in your prose style. If you are under immense pressure to act as if the product really works well, when it’s a stinker, your prose may become a little defensive or deliberately ambiguous. Your mask may slip off occasionally, as you try to write around those embarrassing flaws in the product, covering up the lousy parts of the interface, overlooking the messy inconsistencies, and pretending that the product works just fine.

The more intensely you feel that the persona you have to adopt is fake, the less certain your prose will be. In that situation, redefine your relationship with your audience. Start writing like a human being talking to a real individual. Of course, you may get fired for your effort, but you’ll leave behind some decent prose. But generally, you’ll succeed in reaching your audience. Remember: there are several personas available within any genre, and if you don’t like the persona that your organization has settled on, consider a change of costume.

Adapt the genre to the forum

The place where you carry on your conversations with your visitors—the Web site, or your particular area within the site—acts as a forum in which several communities come together. Each niche audience has its own vocabulary; its own ideas of what is fashionable, valuable, or innovative; its own arguments and controversies; its own fixed opinions. If you are trying to become a member of

But to use a genre freely and creatively is not the same as to create a genre from the beginning; genres must be fully mastered in order to be manipulated freely.

—Mikhail Bakhtin,
Speech Genres and Other Essays

one of these communities, your effort to fit in will affect the way you write, no matter what genre you are working in.

But the forum itself imposes its own rules, values, and style. The forum (including all the people who participate in the conversation there) defines whether a particular topic is required, acceptable, or never to be mentioned; whether one of the genre's component element is really important, optional, or definitely to be included; whether one of the genre's conventional styles really works; whether one persona pleases, amuses, reassures, or bores.

When you first enter a forum, you do not yet understand all the conventions and assumptions of the communities there. You may make mistakes and embarrass yourself. But gradually you become socialized. You learn how to write for these folks.

After a while you outgrow the conventions and start to challenge some of the constraints, dead ideas, and ossified beliefs. Only in this way can you remain in the community, while giving your own perspective on the issues it holds dear, carving out your own identity. You begin to transform the genre, taking it in a new direction, making it more your own.

Go gonzo once in a while

For your own sake and for your audience, once you have learned how to write within a particular genre, you must push it to the limit, changing it so that it does a better job accommodating your audience, your context, and your own experience. Generic writing may do an adequate job for the audience for a while, but if you do nothing but obey the conventions, you cannot write well, and eventually your audience wanders away.

Take Christopher Locke's project, Entropy Gradient Reversals, a webzine and e-mail list that asks, "Does intelligent life exist in online business?" Locke's alter ego, RageBoy, challenges most of the assumptions of mass marketing and mass media. "RageBoy is all my own worst qualities and character defects, somehow split out into a separate personality, that, allowed free range on the Web, has attained a disturbing measure of autonomy. He is my science-fiction monster run amok." Naturally, stretching the genre of marketing advice to the limit, Locke won thousands of subscribers, who

liked his heretical stance, and, ironically, big businesses paid him a lot of money to come in and do presentations to shock their marketing troops. As Locke says, you may want to go gonzo:

Everyone needs an outlet for that part of themselves that usually isn't allowed to speak at all. Not always to be sure, but often, that part has something vital to say. It has a certain wisdom, but we repress it, thinking it's too weird, too untamed, too out of control.
(Christopher Locke, *Gonzo Marketing*)

See: Bruffee (1986), Burke (1969), Fish (1980), Foucault (1972), Locke (2001), Park (1986), Phelps (1990), Porter (1992).

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