

Teaching Genre Conventions and Building Genre Awareness

Professionals and academics compose various kinds of writing that enable them to achieve particular goals. For students to have success composing in different subject areas, they need to develop comfortability and flexibility when working with different genres, or kinds of writing. Teaching genre conventions and awareness equips students with the skills and the knowledge to compose effective communication in any discipline.

In Class Activities

Genre Brainstorming¹

Begin class by giving students 2-3 minutes to individually brainstorm 3 different reasons they write throughout the day. Give examples such as “texting my friend” or “because my teacher makes me” to demonstrate that these should be real-life examples. Next give students 5 minutes to come up with one type of writing they create in response to each of the situations they thought of. “Texting my friend” produces a text message. “Because my teacher makes me” results in an academic paper. Ask students to share their situations and corresponding writing genres with the class. Finally, individually or in groups, brainstorm reasons for writing within the discipline of the class. Identify what kinds of writing result from the situations suggested. For example, in a chemistry class, students write to show lab findings, resulting in the genre of the lab report. In a communications class, students write to share and promote information, resulting in the genre of the press release.

Writing Situations²

Choose a genre to analyze as a class or divide students in groups to analyze different genres. For each genre, explain the situation that shapes that type of writing. Identify:

- who traditionally writes these kinds of texts
- who is most likely to read the text
- what the author’s relationship is with those who will most likely read the text
- what the author hopes the text will accomplish
- what kinds of events or situations create the need for this kind of writing

Share and discuss the answers to these questions as a class, taking time to reflect on how the answers might impact the way the genre(s) is (are) formatted, worded, or used.

Disciplinary Genre Analysis Case Studies²

Break students into groups. Give each group a professional-quality example of disciplinary writing. In groups, read the examples and identify the following for each:

- author
- audience
- purpose

Discuss in groups whether the writing was effective or ineffective in reaching its audience and achieving its purpose, pointing to specific parts of the text as evidence. Ask students to share their analyses with the class. If the disciplinary texts handed out were all samples from the same genre, the analyses for each may be similar. If the disciplinary texts handed out cover a variety of genres, the analyses will vary. In both cases, ask students to reflect on the differences or similarities in the situations that called for the texts they have just read.

Out of Class Activities

Genre Scavenger Hunt³

Ask students to use library or digital resources to locate disciplinary pieces of communication written by differing authors. For example, in a history survey class, ask students to locate a piece of writing from a particular time period written by a scholar, an eye-witness to a historical event, and a politician. Alternatively, in an English literature class, ask students to locate a text written by a literary critic, a poet, and a student. For each resource students find, ask them to identify the genre and to analyze the purpose the author was hoping to achieve with their writing. Have students reflect on what kinds of decisions the authors made to achieve their goals.

The Genre Collector¹

Choose a particular disciplinary genre in which you would like students to be fluent. Ask students to use library or digital resources to locate 3 examples of texts written within that genre. At least one of those pieces has to be something they found extremely effective and well-crafted and at least one has to be a text they found to be ineffective and poorly-constructed. Accompanying each genre example should be a short description of why the student found the piece effective or ineffective. Their answer must incorporate a reflection on specific choices the author made considering such aspects as word choice, formatting, or tone.

The Genre Collector – Extension Option²

Ask students to take the one piece that they found to be extremely effective in the Genre Collector activity and have them

answer the following questions, giving an explicit example from the text to support each answer:

- What kind of language is used?
- Are the sentences simple or complex?
- Is there much variety in sentence structure?
- Is there specialized vocabulary?
- What conventions are used?
- Is the language formal or casual?
- What type of formatting is used?

Students may review their answers with one another in pairs during the next class period.

Genre Curveballs³

Choose a disciplinary genre you would like students to be fluent in and then ask students to use the library or digital resources to locate an example of that genre that in some way differs from what is expected. Unexpected differences can include irregular formatting, an unusual level of formality or informality, or an unexpected author. The goal is to find a piece that doesn't follow the usual patterns of that genre. Students will submit a summary of what made their selection unusual and whether they found that deviation from how the genre is usually written to make the piece more or less effective.

First-Hand Experience

Writing to the Situation⁴

Identify a selection of authors, audiences, and purposes that are relevant to your discipline. Ask students to pick one option from each list and write in response to the resulting situation. If there is a genre of writing that already exists for the created situation, students can rely on that. If there is no real precedent for how to write in response to this situation, ask students to make informed choices with regards to tone, word-choice, and format in an attempt to create a piece of communication that is effective. For example, in an education class, optional lists could look as follows:

Authors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Classroom teacher● Education Professor in a University● A specialist within a particular educational field (ESL instructor, reading specialist, etc.)
Audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Administrator● Fellow faculty members● An academic journal
Purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Proposing a curriculum modification● Designing a lesson plan● Presenting pedagogical research

Ask students to include a short reflection with their writing identifying what choices they made in order to create an effective piece given the situation they chose.

Genre Experimentation³

Choose a professional-quality piece of writing from within your discipline for students to read. Ask students to rewrite the composition, changing either the original author, purpose, or audience. For example, in a marketing and advertising class, have students rewrite a press release from the company announcing a new product. The purpose of the press release is to apologize to customers for a product failure. Alternatively, in a history class, ask students to rewrite a textbook's account of a historical battle from the perspective of the losing party. Request that students also include a written reflection with their composition in order to explain what choices they made when altering the piece of writing and why they did so.

Write like a Professional²

Choose a disciplinary genre you would like students to be fluent in. As a class or individually, identify the individuals or groups who typically write and read this genre. Decide what purpose this genre is generally used to accomplish. Ask students to write in the genre that corresponds to a real life situation that you provide them with. Students will submit both the composition and a reflection paper indicating whom they were writing as, who they were writing for, what their goals were, and what decisions they made based on these factors.

Write like a Professional – Extension Option²

Provide a professional-quality piece of writing from the genre you asked students to write in for the “Write like a Professional” activity (above). Using their reflection papers from that activity, ask students to identify and list any similarities and differences between their composition and the one you provided them with. Lists should include references to tone, word-choice, and/or format. Students should also attempt to identify whether differences between the two compositions were due to differences in author, intended audience, or purpose.

Insider Information²

Have students interview a professional who works in your discipline and who has some expertise in a genre you are teaching. Interviews should focus on that professional’s process for drafting and revising when composing within this genre. This activity can be accomplished by having students conduct interviews with a writer who visits the classroom or by asking students to seek out professionals on their own time. Afterwards, ask students to reflect on any new ideas they may have learned or may try in their own efforts to write in this genre.

Instruction Manual²

Choose a disciplinary genre that students have been studying and practicing in class. Ask students to draw up instructions on how to effectively write within that genre for someone who is unfamiliar with the genre.

References:

¹Dean, Deborah. *Genre Theory: Teaching, Writing, and Being*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 2008. Print.

²Devitt, Amy, Mary Jo Reiff, and Anis Bawarshi. *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*. New York: Pearson Education, 2004. Print.

³Danah Hashem’s assignments

⁴Danah Hashem’s assignments adapted from Megan Grandmont’s assignments