

# 1 Introduction and Overview

Over the past thirty years, researchers working across a range of disciplines and contexts have revolutionized the way we think of genre, challenging the idea that genres are simple categorizations of text types and offering instead an understanding of genre that connects kinds of texts to kinds of social actions. As a result, genres have become increasingly defined as ways of recognizing, responding to, acting meaningfully and consequentially within, and helping to reproduce recurrent situations. This idea of genres as typified rhetorical ways of interacting within recurring situations (Miller, “Genre as Social Action”) has had a profound impact on the study and teaching of writing. Researchers and teachers working across borders (North America, Australia, Brazil, France and Switzerland), across disciplines (applied linguistics, TESOL, rhetoric, composition studies, technical communication, critical discourse analysis, sociology, education, literary theory), and across grade levels and contexts (primary, secondary, post-secondary as well as professional and public writing) have explored the analytical and pedagogical implications of genre in ways that reveal genres as significant variables in literacy acquisition. In order to consider what a genre approach to the study and teaching of writing means and how it can best be implemented, this book examines the various traditions that have shaped our understanding of genre, and how these traditions have informed work in genre research and pedagogy.

Despite the wealth of genre scholarship over the last thirty years, the term *genre* itself remains fraught with confusion, competing with popular theories of genre as text type and as an artificial system of classification. Part of the confusion has to do with whether genres merely sort and classify the experiences, events, and actions they represent (and are therefore conceived of as labels or containers for meaning), or whether genres reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways (and therefore play a critical role in meaning-making). Interestingly, these competing views of genre are

reflected in the etymology of the word *genre*, which is borrowed from French. On the one hand, *genre* can be traced, through its related word *gender*, to the Latin word *genus*, which refers to “kind” or “a class of things.” On the other hand, *genre*, again through its related word *gender*, can be traced to the Latin cognate *gener*, meaning to generate. The range of ways genre has been defined and used throughout its history reflects its etymology. At various times and in various areas of study, genre has been defined and used mainly as a classificatory tool, a way of sorting and organizing kinds of texts and other cultural objects. But more recently and, again, across various areas of study, genre has come to be defined less as a means of organizing kinds of texts and more as a powerful, ideologically active, and historically changing shaper of texts, meanings, and social actions. From this perspective, genres are understood as forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations. This view recognizes genres as both organizing *and* generating kinds of texts and social actions, in complex, dynamic relation to one another.

Such a dynamic view of genre calls for studying and teaching genres beyond only their formal features. Instead, it calls for recognizing how formal features, rather than being arbitrary, are connected to social purposes and to ways of being and knowing in relationship to these purposes. It calls for understanding how and why a genre’s formal features come to exist the way they do, and how and why they make possible certain social actions/relations and not others. In short, it calls for understanding genre knowledge as including not only knowledge of formal features but also knowledge of what and whose purposes genres serve; how to negotiate one’s intentions in relation to genres’ social expectations and motives; when and why and where to use genres; what reader/writer relationships genres maintain; and how genres relate to other genres in the coordination of social life.

How to implement this deeper understanding of genre and activate this kind of genre knowledge has varied across genre approaches, informed as these have been by different traditions and intellectual resources as well as by different pedagogical imperatives and conditions. Part 1 of the book will examine these approaches in more detail as they emerge, over time, in different areas of study, from literary theory to systemic functional linguistics (what is often called the “Sydney school” of genre theory) to historical/corpus linguistics to English for

Specific Purposes to Rhetorical Genre Studies (what is often termed the “North American” approach to genre theory) to the French and Swiss pedagogical traditions to the Brazilian synthesis. It matters, as we will describe, that the Sydney school genre approach emerged in response to a national curriculum aimed at K-12 students; that the English for Specific Purposes approach emerged in response to the needs of graduate student, non-native speakers of English; that the Brazilian synthesis has been energized by the Brazilian Ministry of Education’s National Curricular Parameters and the International Symposium on Genre Studies (SIGET), held since 2003; that the Rhetorical Genre Studies approach has been informed by rhetorical theory and sociology and has targeted college-level, native speakers of English. But what connects these various approaches is a commitment to the idea that genres reflect and coordinate social ways of knowing and acting in the world, and hence provide valuable means of researching how texts function in various contexts (the focus of Part 2 of the book) and how to teach students to act meaningfully in various contexts (the focus of Part 3).

The interest in genre study and teaching has been broad in scope and has been enriched by multidisciplinary and international perspectives. In their introduction to *Genre in a Changing World*, a recently published collection of twenty-four papers selected from the Fourth International Symposium on Genre Studies (SIGET IV), Charles Bazerman, Adair Bonini, and Débora Figueiredo describe genre studies’ global reach, with authors in the collection representing Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Finland, France, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As Bazerman, Bonini, and Figueiredo explain, the concept of genre has been particularly useful in helping literacy educators respond to the demands of a global world and information-based economies (ix-x). Genre, they argue, by helping to “elaborate writing as a focused, purposive, highly-differentiated task,” helps us understand and prepare students for the increasingly specialized communicative needs of disciplines, professions, and everyday life (x). At the same time, genre can help provide “access to the benefits of advanced levels of education” to an increasing number of people around the world (x), as we will see in the case of Australia and Brazil. As Bazerman, Bonini, and Figueiredo eloquently conclude:

A world tied together by communication and knowledge, enacting increasingly complex cooperations

on many levels, puts an increasing demand on the genres that share our meanings and knowledge, that coordinate our actions, and that hold our institutions together. A world being transformed by new technologies and media as well as new social and economic arrangements creates the need for rapid and deep transformation of genres. In a world where pressing problems require increasing levels of coordination and mutual understanding, forging effective genres is a matter of global well-being. In a world where increasingly high degrees of literate participation are needed by citizens of all nations, advancing the communicative competence of all, making available the genres of power and cooperation, is a matter of social capacity and social justice. (xiv)

In the U.S., and within Rhetoric and Composition studies, the concept of genre has begun to inform the study and teaching of writing in important and exciting ways. In the past few years, a number of edited collections and books that examine and apply genre theory have been published, targeting a mainstream composition audience; various composition journals have published scholarship in genre theory; the number of conference sessions devoted to genre at major conferences is on the rise, each drawing increasingly larger audiences; and several composition textbooks have recently appeared with genre as their guiding concept (we will discuss some of these in Chapters 10 and 11). Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that we are witnessing something of a “genre turn” in Rhetoric and Composition studies, one that is informing various aspects of the field’s commitments: from the teaching of writing at various levels and in various contexts to the study of writing as a form of ideological action and social participation to research on writing, metacognition, and transferability. In his 2005 *College Composition and Communication* essay, “Composition at the Turn of the Century,” Richard Fulkerson calls for an overview of genre scholarship within composition and rhetoric that can delineate the various genre traditions and applications.

Two recent books targeting secondary school audiences attest to the growing influence of genre on writing instruction in the U.S. Deborah Dean’s *Genre Theory: Teaching, Writing, and Being* introduces genre studies to high school writing teachers, arguing that a genre ap-

proach in the secondary classroom can teach students a view of writing as situated and can connect reading and writing, product and process. Cathy Fleischer and Sarah Andrew-Vaughan's *Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone: Helping Students Navigate Unfamiliar Genres*, building on the work of Heather Lattimer (*Thinking Through Genre*) and Tony Romano (*Blending Genre, Altering Style*), develops a genre-based curriculum in which students select, analyze, and produce unfamiliar genres in response to various literacy tasks. This pedagogy, they argue, helps students develop the analytical, transferable skills to write in a range of genres and for a variety of purposes. Such a genre-informed curriculum is reflected in a 2008 policy research brief titled "Writing Now" produced by the National Council of Teachers of English. The research brief identifies genre as a key component in writing instruction, and proposes that "writing instruction . . . would benefit from deep study of genre considerations" ("Writing Now" 17).

The "Writing Now" brief is careful to acknowledge and to dispel myths of genre as formulaic writing, a concern echoed by Barbara Little Liu in "More than the Latest P.C. Buzzword for Modes: What Genre Theory Means to Composition." Liu points out that while the word *genre* plays a key role in the influential Council of Writing Program Administrators' "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" ("Write in several genres," "Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics," "Understand how genres shape reading and writing"), the concept of genre remains under-defined and not well understood (73). As such, Liu cautions that the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" reintroduces genre into the mainstream discourse of Rhetoric and Composition without informing the concept of genre with new insights from recent work in genre theory, thus risking the possibility that a "genre-based approach reverts to a product-centered approach, and the writing process becomes a series of increasingly accurate attempts to replicate an ideal text rather than an engaged understanding of how writing and writers work within a complex world" (73-74). To address this concern, Liu calls for "an introduction to genre theory for nonspecialist composition instructors" (224).

This volume aims to provide a reference guide to genre for writing instructors and writing program administrators working in various institutional contexts, such as first-year composition programs, TESOL programs, graduate-level writing programs for international students,

and writing in the disciplines/writing across the curriculum programs. The volume is also aimed at scholars, beginning and advanced, in Rhetoric and Composition and in related areas such as rhetorical criticism, applied linguistics, discourse analysis, cultural studies, education, and sociology, who are interested in theorizing, researching, and applying genre to the study and teaching of writing.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow, we will provide an overview of genre theory, research, and pedagogy, tracing the different traditions that inform them in order to account for the variations and overlaps in genre application. We will present an historical overview of genre; describe and explain key issues and scholarship that have led to the reconceptualization of genre over the last 30 years and what such a reconceptualization has meant for the study and teaching of writing; examine current research and lines of development in the study of genre; provide examples of various methodologies for conducting genre research; and explore the possibilities and implications for using genre to teach writing at various levels and within different disciplines. In short, we will examine genre historically, theoretically, and pedagogically, in ways which we hope will be useful for new and experienced teachers and researchers who are interested in locating and exploring the scholarly and pedagogical possibilities of genre.

Part 1 (Chapters 2 through 6) of the book examines the various traditions that have informed current understandings and applications of genre. Chapter 2 traces genre study within literary traditions in order to describe how these have contributed to widespread attitudes about genres as either exclusively aesthetic objects or as impositions on the artistic spirit, and how recent literary and cultural studies approaches expand the scope of genre study in ways that align with linguistic and socio-rhetorical traditions.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine genre study within linguistic traditions, which were the first to identify genre's pedagogical implications. Chapter 3 focuses on genre within systemic functional linguistics as well as historical and corpus linguistics, describing how genre researchers in Australia brought genre to bear on systemic functional linguistics and applied it to literacy education in primary and secondary schools. We will examine how such an approach challenged process-based writing

instruction, and we will describe some of the critiques of such an approach. Chapter 3 also describes how genre is becoming a significant variable in historical and corpus linguistics.

Chapter 4 continues to explore genre study within linguistic traditions by focusing on the rich tradition of work done in genre analysis and teaching within English for Specific Purposes. We describe John Swales's influential work in developing a genre analytical method that accounts for discourse community and communicative purpose, and we trace developments in the field over the last twenty years as they bridge linguistic and rhetorical traditions and address the specialized literacy needs of graduate-level non-native speakers of English.

Chapter 5 examines genre study within rhetorical and sociological traditions, describing how these traditions helped shift the emphasis of genre study from the communicative actions to the social actions genres perform. We distinguish between communicative and sociological genre approaches and then trace how Carolyn Miller's groundbreaking work in "Genre as Social Action" was informed by research in rhetorical criticism and social phenomenology, which created new possibilities for the study and teaching of genre. The chapter concludes with an overview of the French and Swiss pedagogic traditions and how that tradition, along with linguistic and socio-rhetorical traditions, has been synthesized within Brazilian genre studies.

Chapter 6 describes how scholars in Rhetorical Genre Studies have extended the idea of genre as social and rhetorical action over the past twenty-five years. We identify and explain key developments in genre study, including concepts such as genre sets and systems, uptake, meta-genres, distributed cognition, genre chronotope, and activity systems. As we will describe throughout Part 1, the various traditions and intellectual resources that have been brought to bear on genre study help to clarify the analytical and pedagogical uses to which genres have been applied.

Part 2 of the book (Chapters 7 through 9) examines a wide range of empirical genre research conducted in multiple contexts (academic, workplace, and public), in various countries, for various purposes, utilizing a range of methods. The chapters cover a range of research studies in order to showcase trends in research interests, kinds of study designs and methods used, findings, and areas of future research. Chapter 7 traces genre research within academic contexts, focusing on studies of genre acquisition and development that have shaped debates

over the efficacy of explicit genre teaching. The chapter examines studies of genre and early childhood writing development, secondary and college-level studies of genre teaching and learning, studies of genre and advanced literacy, studies of cultural influences on genre acquisition, as well as historical and international studies.

Chapter 8 focuses on genre research in workplace and professional contexts. The chapter includes historical studies of scientific articles, economics textbooks, legal genres, and business communication, as well as international studies from Brazil. As well, the chapter includes a range of studies that examine how genres mediate social activities, power relations, and identities within professional contexts, such as banks, social work agencies, and insurance companies.

Chapter 9 describes future directions in genre research, examining genre research in public and electronic contexts as well as in new media. This chapter as well draws on international and historical studies (for example, letters and land deeds) as well as new genres such as blogs and websites and instant messaging.

Part 3 of the book (Chapters 10 and 11) explores pedagogical approaches to genre. Drawing on the various genre traditions and research studies described in Parts 1 and 2, Chapter 10 examines the range of ways genre scholars have used genre to support writing instruction. Along the way, and drawing on international and U.S. perspectives, we describe the debates over the explicit teaching of genre and situate them within the traditions and pedagogical conditions (secondary, undergraduate, graduate; native, non-native speakers of English) that inform them.

Chapter 11 examines Rhetorical Genre Studies-based pedagogical approaches, with a focus on how to develop students' genre knowledge within first-year composition courses that transfers across writing situations; how to teach a critical awareness of genre; how to teach students to move from critique to production of alternative genres; and, finally, how to situate genres within the contexts of their use, whether public, professional, or disciplinary contexts.

The overarching goal of all these chapters is to provide readers with an overview of what genre approaches have to offer for the study and teaching of writing. As a result, we hope readers will be better able to account for various genres approaches and be better positioned to make use of genre as a research and teaching tool.