

## 14. Genre

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The word *genre* comes from the French, meaning “kind.” *Genre* was used as early as 1770 to name “a particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose” (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Just as the related term *genus* names a broad category or “kind” into which more *specific* members can be grouped (for example, horses and zebras are two *species* in the equine *genus*), a genre is a categorization: Diverse specimens sharing some quality are part of a genre defined by that quality.

You may be familiar with *genre* as a term that describes recognizable, repeated forms of literary expression (e.g., *sonnets*, or *Elizabethan sonnets*; *mystery novels*, or *young adult detective serials*). Technical communicators and educators often use *genre* similarly to identify common types of technical writing, such as *proposals*, *instruction manuals*, and *sales letters*. This familiar usage helps us name and group individual texts, and conversely, it signals characteristics that *audiences* expect to find in a text. But as helpful as it is for classifying regularities of already-written texts, this usage is less helpful for guiding or explaining the composition of new messages.

To better tackle these matters, technical communication turns to 20th century *rhetorical* theory. Building on earlier work that related genres to types of rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968), Carolyn Miller (1984) famously described genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (p. 159). This insight gave rise to the rhetorical genre studies (RGS) model that dominates genre scholarship in technical communication today. At root, genres are particular *kinds* of communication, expressed in recurring *contexts*, used to accomplish particular *purposes* shared by writers and their *audiences*.

RGS scholarship has undergone numerous shifts since the 1970s, and several good summaries are available (e.g., Artemeva, 2006; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Henze with Miller & Carradini, 2016; Kain, 2005). RGS helps us to understand what’s happening when writers and readers communicate through the mediation of various kinds of text. In the RGS model, a genre is a way of understanding characteristic activities that happen in a particular context. Although a genre may in fact have a characteristic form or *style*, these emerge as a result of “genred” *activity*—the repeated responses of actual writers in routine or repeating practical contexts. What’s important is the activity, not the form.

Genres may be regular, recognizable, authoritative, and even apparently stable, but they are also generative, creative, mutable, open-ended, dynamic, and

efficient. Catherine Schryer (2000) defines genres as “constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies” (p. 450): They’re “regulated” because it’s not just the author but the relevant social context that determines whether a communication will be legible, yet “improvisational” since context gives authors an indefinite range of choices. Writers learn to work within a set of genres that community members have validated through repeated use. These genres not only help the writer to identify situationally appropriate types of rhetorical response, but also create a rhetorical space for invention.

This notion of genres in dynamic tension is important because it helps to explain why even the most apparently stable genres still change over time and permit variations. Experienced writers, after all, don’t simply follow templates; they respond to *exigencies* (circumstances that provoke an action), they account for *context* (the variables of circumstance, timing, and relationship that surround a communication), and they create *content* that has meaning in particular cultures (including institutional and professional cultures).

Technical communication often occurs in complex institutional settings, and in technical contexts, social dynamics include the many ways institutions act as agents in discourse. For example, technical communicators often do not “author” their own texts: Instead, they’re parts of a larger system of content generation, repurposing, *editing*, production, and distribution. In this system, the individual writer might be little aware of the ultimate rhetorical purposes of a text they create. The locus of rhetorical activity is just as likely to be an institution, a user-responsive system (e.g., context-sensitive help), or some other *actor*.

Just as the complexity of rhetorical contexts has altered the priorities of genre work in technical communication, so too does genre look different in the heavily mediated contexts of technical communication. After all, even an individually authored text is the product of editors, publishers, and other intermediaries, not just its “author.” But in many technical communication contexts, the extent of this mediation is even more profound. For example, the technical writers who create a context-sensitive help system for a computer program may compose discrete chunks of text that appear on users’ screens. But the appearance, order, and timing of those texts are governed by user behavior (such as clicking a “help” button or entering an erroneous command). The text is also mediated by programming that neither writer nor user created. The “document” is not a fixed product; it’s an emergent experience produced in response to user input, using content prepared by a technical writer, and mediated by programming.

Since the recognizable conventions of genres result from accumulated rhetorical performances, genres can evolve over time and vary across contexts. Genres might seem “stabilized-for-now,” as Schryer (1993, p. 204) puts it, but over time they adopt some of the variations introduced by writers responding to their exigencies. For example, Charles Bazerman (1988) describes the evolution of *scientific research* articles over centuries in response to the changing social dynamics and rhetorical contexts of experimental science.

Genres can also hybridize as writers combine strategies from multiple genres to tackle new problems. Carolyn Rude (1995), for example, showed how the decision-making report genre adapted strategies taken from proposals, experimental reports, and persuasive essays. Far from being mere *constraints* or *rules* to be followed, genres are more like a toolbox of handy strategies that can be applied to conventional tasks, but also remixed, repurposed, and modified in response to novel rhetorical challenges.

Change happens very quickly in many technical contexts. In these fluid contexts, some genres might change so rapidly that formal and stylistic conventions between the “generations” of a genre are negligible. Simply examining two examples of the same genre—say, two weather forecasts, or two error reports, separated by a few years and a few iterations of media—might yield few obvious similarities. The equivalency of these genre performances resides in their communicative context, the “social action” that the texts engage in, despite the many differences in *how* the texts do what they do.

Because technical communication situations are often distributed and complex, the individual text is often less salient than groups of interacting texts: for example, the sequence of CFP, inquiry letter, grant application, budget, impact report, and other genres associated with grant seeking. Technical communication *research* has studied how genres relate to one another in sets (Devitt, 1991, 2004), systems (Bazerman, 1994; Russell, 1997; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002), repertoires (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), ecologies (Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000), and other assemblages.

Rather than operating independently, genres often function together in sequences of recognized discourse “moves.” To understand a genre is to appreciate its rhetorical ecosystem, including other genres and the various actors and relationships surrounding it. Foundational scholarship drawing upon *activity theory* and actor-networks, especially that of David Russell (1997), Clay Spinuzzi and Mark Zachry (2000), and Spinuzzi (2003, 2008), has examined how complex and distributed communities and networks get things done by sharing resources, including genres. Natasha Jones (2016), for example, shows how members of the Innocence Project Northwest adapted the communication genres circulating among Innocence Project chapters to accomplish local goals. The community’s genres, including weekly team meetings, client-completed questionnaires, and Facebook posts, not only “help[ed] coordinate and promote collaboration,” but also helped the community to “shape a cohesive identity and common goals” (Jones, 2016, p. 310).

Individually and in assemblages, genres can not only help actors to get work done, but they are also part of the joint processes of enculturation, disciplinary learning and reproduction, and sense-making that enable participants to coordinate activity. In a sense, genres function as vectors, carrying elements of a discourse along the various branches and turnings of a complex activity system or network.

Finally, technical communication scholars study how new practitioners are enculturated into their disciplines and professions, in part, by way of genres. Though technical genres are still routinely taught in introductory courses, scholarly opinion about the efficacy of teaching genres is mixed. Some scholars (e.g., Freedman, 1993; Freedman et al., 1994) doubt that genres can be explicitly taught in the classroom, since genre use is responsive to exigency and context, and classrooms are not authentic contexts for these genres. Others, including Amy Devitt, counter that the classroom can provide effective preparation for future technical genre use. Although the classroom doesn't offer exigencies identical to those in professional settings, Devitt (2009) argues that teachers can introduce genre principles that prepare students to improvise in response to the exigencies they encounter in later workplace contexts.

Teaching students *about genre* (rather than teaching particular genres) can help them become more versatile, savvy communicators and observers of their disciplines and workplaces, and thus better able to acquire disciplinary skills and awareness quickly once they're in the workplace. As Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff (2010) describe it, genres function as "learning strategies or tools for accessing unfamiliar writing situations" (p. 191). Devitt (2004) proposes a *pedagogy* based upon "meta-awareness of genres, as learning strategies rather than static features" of text (p. 197).

As content production becomes increasingly divisible from distribution and consumption, technical communicators are less likely to "author" whole, stable units of end-user text. They may also find themselves becoming more involved in the components of *documentation* or *information* systems that are harder to recognize as writing or communication: components like interface *design*, content reuse, *translation*, and distribution.

The shift in technical communication scholarship toward studies of larger information systems, networks, and genre ecologies reflects the new realities of our field. Just as the characteristic genres continue to evolve, we can expect our genre theory to continue to expand and hybridize as researchers study and theorize contemporary genres and communication practices in complex networks, systems, and institutions.

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