

Chapter 13. Applying and Adapting Genres

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This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify the rhetorical and dynamic features in textual genres
- Predict and apply key features of different genres as you write
- Determine when and how to critique and/or revise a genre pattern

You're probably most familiar with genre patterns through your reading or movie-watching: you know that the features and patterns of a horror film (or novel) are different from those of a romance or an anime film. But these patterns are

not set in stone. For example, in recent years, some directors and critics have identified “bromance” as a new genre, creating a new genre space between a romance and a male buddy movie. Similarly, if you ever watched a movie that was advertised as a horror film and you were disappointed because it was well acted but not very scary, you may have decided that the film *was not a horror film* but some other genre.

You’ve just learned the crucial feature of genres: they are rhetorical and thus dynamic.

13.1 Genres Are Rhetorical and Dynamic

The not-scary-enough horror film example can help us understand how genres differ from formulas or recipes. If “horror film” were a precise formula, then a writer could always follow it and create a blockbuster sensation, the way a chemist can always combine two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen at a particular temperature and pressure and create water. But genres are rhetorical: they require an author who has goals to interact with a reader who has needs and goals of their own, and that human context keeps everything in motion.

Genres—in film, dance, music, and art, as well as in writing—function based on mutual agreements between writers and audiences, in a dynamic social paradox:

- Audiences learn the features of a genre from writers, by reading or viewing dozens of compositions that are called “horror films” (or memos, or poems, or reggaeton songs).

AND

- Writers modify genres based on audience feedback: as more audience members think horror films need to be scarier, writers and directors start to change the genre.

As a reflective writer, you understand several threshold concepts that support the idea that there is no one perfect stable form of any genre:



Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.



Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.



Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.



There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting tuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

But just because genres are in flux doesn't mean "anything goes." Reflective writers also recognize and make use of common genre patterns to help us predict what a particular audience will expect and value in a document. Just as you can make an educated guess about what to wear to your second cousin's engagement party based on the pattern of previous parties, you can predict that some styles or patterns of writing are more appropriate for one context, one teacher, or one friend than another. Identifying and practicing these patterns saves you time, because you don't have to consider every single choice. It also increases your chances for success, because readers are often comfortable with writing similar to what they have seen before.

When you learn to use genres as a reflective writer, you can accept the ways they are both stable and dynamic, both predictable and adaptable, and learn to use them in ways that improve your ability to communicate with a wide range of readers.

Explore 13.1

Consider a writing task that you need to complete soon, whether it's for school, work, or personal goals. Write 3-4 prediction sentences—not about details like word-count or topic, but about larger patterns. What can you predict about the patterns your readers will prefer for your focus, evidence, or approach? What can you predict about the document you will need to compose, considering its organization, components, or media? What about the style: if this writing task were a party, would you show up in jeans, a suit, or a tuxedo or gown?



13.2 Genres Are Contextual and Powerful

Since writing is a social act rather than a random collection of rules, you can predict that every genre you choose (or are asked) to follow will have deeper roots, related to the audience, context, and/or goals of your writing project. And because genres are social and rhetorical, they are changeable: when a writer's goals or a reader's needs change, good writing evolves to match that rhetorical situation. The more you know about the context of a genre, and the more flexible you are in using that writing pattern, the more power you will have as a reflective writer.

Genres reflect and influence social contexts

In the discourse community examples discussed elsewhere in this book, a psychologist, a historian, a biologist, and an engineer walk into a bar in order to write a report. Because each person comes from a different community of thinkers and writers—a community defined in part by the ways they communicate with each other—each is trained to see different kinds of problems and value different kinds of information, and each will thus rely on different genres. For example, the historian uses more narratives with quotations, and the engineer uses more reports with graphs. It seems obvious that their genres aren't random, but instead reflect their predictable *ways of thinking about the world*. Through years of “thinking like an engineer,” for instance, one writer has come to value numerical representations of information, and they know that readers in their professional community will value those as well.

What may be less obvious is that the patterns they choose for their writing will in turn influence the deep thought patterns of their writers and audiences. Readers who encounter the bar as a series of stories about former bartenders will have quite a different response than readers who encounter the bar as a series of numbers about its physical structure. Over time, for instance, readers who learn about a corner bar—or a city like Sao Paulo, or a group like the US Marines—*only* through reading personal stories may start to believe that every person leads an exciting life filled with surprising events. Or readers may assume that there is no reason to attend to structural issues like accessibility for disabled customers or abstract issues such as employment trends when considering neighborhood bars. It's not just that narrative genres have different content: it's that the whole narrative genre pattern is designed to promote one way of thinking over another.

Genres evolve and are designed

The office memo, the five-paragraph essay, and the objective scientific report in which “beakers are filled with 5 ml of solution” (but no humans with names ever fill them) did not appear fully formed on someone's desk one day—nor did a secret committee labor for years to create their perfect formats. A set of situational needs and individual human responses combined, and continue to combine, to influence writing patterns.

The “five-paragraph essay” common in school settings is a great example to consider. As a thought experiment, we can theorize that many of its features might be **evolutionary** responses to common rhetorical expectations from US academic audiences. For instance:

- Readers in a heterogeneous, argument-based culture like the US might reasonably prefer a clear statement of purpose early in an essay.

- Readers from a skeptical, scientific-method-based community like a college or university might prefer multiple points of evidence to be presented.
- Readers from a Western/European culture may find that the number *three* has many cultural and even religious resonances and so patterns involving *three points* make them comfortable—even at a level beyond conscious awareness.

We can also imagine how some of the five-paragraph essay features might have been **designed**. Suppose an exhausted middle-school teacher with 32 squirmy students, frustrated after weeks of trying to explain that writing is rhetorical and needs to be adapted for each assignment, decided to simplify the situation: “Just put your thesis in the first paragraph, give at least two examples in each body paragraph, and complete an introduction, conclusion, and three body paragraphs before you turn that essay in.” This description certainly describes one reasonable approach to writing an academic argument. The students may have been so relieved to have one thing in middle school finally seem definite and reliable that they followed the directions, and perhaps the teacher told another teacher down the hall, and voila, the five-paragraph essay began to emerge from the murky fog of Hamilton-King Middle School.

Do we know the true biography of the five-paragraph essay? No. But some combination of evolution and design is likely here, as it is for other genres such as memos, reports, and web pages. And when we think of a genre’s origins as social and dynamic—not just an inflexible set of rules—we can better predict what features we should replicate and which might be open to change.

Genres are predictable and adaptable

Scholars in writing explain that written genres arise out of repeated rhetorical situations: readers in one situation request the same information or persuasion or entertainment, in about the same amount, with about the same level of complexity, again and again. So writers begin to predict those needs and provide—by evolution and/or design—the same pattern of writing for that situation. Readers eventually find a pattern of a document that they’re pretty comfortable with (a scientific report with an Introduction-Methods-Results-and-Discussion structure, for instance), and writers become accustomed to producing it, and readers become even more comfortable with it, and it becomes an accepted genre, perhaps even with a name or nickname (try an online search for “IMRaD report” to see how common this genre is now).

Identifying and predicting genre patterns

Identifying a genre pattern and predicting its key features can be extremely useful, because that pattern involves so many elements of a document, from significant

decisions about length, media, and scope of evidence to smaller features such as arrangement, tone, and diction. Some familiar genres are stable enough to be highly predictable: One glance at a poem, a memo, or a science-fair poster can reveal many of the features that distinguish each of those documents from the others, and by your fourth or fifth science-fair poster in a middle-school gymnasium, you can probably deduce many of the key elements of that genre. That process of analyzing a number of texts in the genre—whether it’s superhero comics, vegan cookbooks, or kinesiology journal articles—is the best way to begin to identify what the features are.

Writers who predict genre patterns efficiently can increase the speed and accuracy of their writing significantly, because a single choice (this genre rather than that one) can help them predict a number of goals at once, rather than solving smaller writing problems one at a time.

Adapting genre patterns

Writers gain speed and accuracy from working with predictable genres, but we also need some flexibility. You may have learned a number of academic or workplace genres by closely following a model or instructions that someone gave you. In that case, you’ve probably been trying to make your reports, memos, client notes, team assessments, or performance reviews all look as much like one another—as *formulaic*—as possible. While that approach can be efficient, it has probably also felt puzzling or stifling sometimes, the way writing a five-paragraph essay for a standardized test does. Fortunately, there are better ways to write with genre patterns.

Just as community writing patterns include genres and their features, genres need to be understood as rooted in communities: human, rhetorical relationships that are value-based and dynamic rather than formulaic. A genre such as a memo is a temporary agreement among writers and readers. Readers generally expect names, dates, and subject information to be listed at the top, and writers agree to most often place that information there. But the genre can change, by evolution and design:

- A group of readers—or writers—can argue that the writer’s handwritten initials, department name, time of sending, and/or all “CC” individuals’ names should also be included at the top to improve the communication, and if other members of the community agree to change their expectations, the genre can be redesigned to meet new expectations. (Note how a long-ago writing practice—typing memos on a typewriter with sheets of black carbon paper between multiple sheets of white paper to make exact copies—persists even though the genre has evolved, in the use of the “Carbon Copy” abbreviation.)

- A hurricane might shut down the office for three weeks, requiring all memos to be exchanged by email, and since email already includes header information, then readers and writers might stop expecting the body of the message to repeat that information, and the genre evolves to match the situation.
- An influential member of the community may make a point of using one-word “Subject” descriptors that somehow always convey the essence of the memo’s content, and because many readers admire and strive to duplicate that style, the genre may stretch a bit to allow for a range of subject headers to match individual styles.

These examples suggest that as you identify genre *features*, you need to situate them within the *activities* and among the *readers* for a particular document in the genre, so that you become aware of underlying values that may influence the text-patterns of the genre. You should collect and closely observe individual documents, but like a detective investigating a crime scene, you should look for clues all around the document to help you find interlinking patterns.

Since genres have emerged from communities, writers know that we can often adapt even very stable genres to meet our goals, our readers’ needs, or the context in which we write. It may sound contradictory that a *pattern* must always be *adjusted*, and it’s true that if writers adjust a pattern too much, we can lose efficiency and even disappoint our audience (like the screenwriter who created a non-scary horror movie). It might help think of genres the way we think of musical scores, basketball offense diagrams, recipes for Phad Thai, or designer suits. An advanced director, coach, chef, or tailor is always going to adjust the pattern a little from one performance to the next because the variables of the situation demand change.

Genres involve obvious and nuanced patterns

Some genre patterns are easy to spot, especially those that involve the media, arrangement, and length of a document. You can probably distinguish a literature analysis essay from a memo or a movie advertisement with a single glance from across a crowded room. Because the differences are highly visible, writers may not wish to make many alterations to these patterns so that they don’t alienate or confuse readers. (A romance movie poster with 1000 words of text and a “Works Cited” section won’t entice many paying customers.)

Other genre features may be less obvious, such as those that involve the evidence, emphasis, and style of a document. A less-obvious feature may still be crucial, depending on the genre. The font of the text in a literature analysis essay may not matter much, but the font in a movie poster can be crucial: we

think of some fonts as romantic (with lots of swirls) and some fonts as exciting (with lots of straight, angled edges). Writers may not have much flexibility to change a genre feature, even a small one, if it strongly influences readers' comprehension or attitude.

You may find that some less-obvious features also give you the opportunity, or even the need, to adapt the genre. For instance, a writer working on two progress reports may use the same overall pattern: the reports may have the same number of paragraphs and charts, in about the same order, with similar language and conclusions. However, each report may need fine-tuning to meet audience needs. "Report A," detailing the early stages of a company's new medical device, might be a report for the committee that is overseeing the project to review and then file away, while "Report B" detailing the final product might be published in the "Research in Progress" section of a company's website for all to see. The second, more public report will need more background detail, credible evidence, and polished style, while the first in-house report can use a less formal style and include examples of difficulties and drawbacks that are important for the company to address during development.

Writers can identify stable genre features—those that most help readers recognize and engage with the document—to help with planning early in the writing process as we predict how to focus, prepare, and structure our document. More nuanced genre patterns may give writers opportunities to adapt and revise the document to reach our goals and affect specific readers.

Using a genre pattern isn't a foolproof strategy, and even experienced writers can guess wrong about whether readers will appreciate or dislike their innovations. (That not-scary-enough horror movie writer may be surprised and sad reading the movie reviews!) But with experience, you can become better at recognizing genre patterns and using them to predict the approaches you want to take as a writer.

Genres can enhance communication

For both readers and writers, recognizable patterns like genres give us the advantage of speed, and some additional help with accuracy. Memo writers, for instance, may know that in their office they should aim for about 200-250 words, that they are expected to begin with a "Summary" of the meeting, and that they must include a "Recommendations" section at the end, so they can streamline their planning process. Likewise, biologists who are writing lab reports for other biologists can anticipate much of the content and vocabulary: these writers and readers share many of the same patterns of questions and patterns of acceptable answers. Some writers find that patterns even help generate rich thinking: if you are writing for a genre where readers expect you to provide consideration

of alternatives or counterarguments, you may find that you increase your critical thinking and creative solutions.

Meanwhile, readers who spot a familiar pattern have less work to do to locate crucial concepts and information. Readers who can predict that a key argument will occur in the first paragraph or two of a document can scan for that argument and quickly orient themselves to the main idea. Generally, if writers and readers agree that a particular kind of information or argument will happen at a particular place in a pattern with a particular set of language markers (like the word “However” to introduce a counterargument), then despite all the differences in time, space, and culture that may separate them, communication grows a little easier.

Explore 13.2



Pick a kind of writing that you do regularly enough— messaging, online posts, your journal, lab reports, a monthly committee summary—that you are familiar with its typical patterns. Write a three-sentence biography (past, present, and future) of that writing pattern: Explain one feature or characteristic that you think evolved or was designed to meet the needs of readers and writers. Describe one feature that you frequently replicate because it makes writing (or reading) faster or easier. And suggest one modification that might be useful in the future, either to include more people or ideas, or to adapt to new contexts, technologies, or situations.

Learn



- To learn more about **discourse communities**, see [Chapter 3: Responding to Readers' Needs](#).
- To learn more about how **modalities** contribute to a genre pattern, see [Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities](#).
- To learn more about how **writing styles** contribute to a genre pattern, see [Chapter 11: Editing in Context](#).
- To learn more about how **advanced readers** use genres to help them engage with a text, see [Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer](#).

Focus on equity: Genres can reinforce discrimination and injustice

Since genres are rooted in social interactions, they can also repeat and even magnify social problems. At a minor level, any kind of formulaic writing can cause or aggravate communication problems when the structure limits the message or creates unnecessary work for writers and readers. For example, since not every meeting results in a decent recommendation, if every post-meeting memo

must include a Recommendations section, a lot of unnecessary proposals may get made. Moreover, one writing pattern may not succeed in multiple situations. The five-paragraph essay pattern that can help seventh-graders organize their thoughts in a report about dolphins might be less helpful for college writers attempting to connect with scholarly audiences using in-depth research in psychology or kinesiology—and it will be much less useful for professionals designing a website that coordinates health care for county residents.

Genres can cause more than just inconvenience or wasted time, however. Any genre is designed and/or evolves to promote some kinds of reading, thinking, and information-sharing over others. Writers should always check to see if a genre is overlooking or excluding key perspectives—or if a whole genre is missing:

- A survey form—or a document like a passport or ID card—that asks people to identify themselves as either male or female serves to erase people who have nonbinary genders.
- A research study that requires reporting only of quantitative data about patients' responses to a drug may overlook the effects of patients' mood or family support structures.
- A timed-essay exam that requires error-free sentences, according to Standard Edited American English, limits the contributions of writers who come from other language backgrounds or who have language-processing disabilities.
- A college course on writing might focus entirely on strategies for reading and writing US academic essays, without acknowledging the power or prevalence of other genres, especially ones that are central to marginalized US groups or international communities (such as autobiography, sermons, music lyrics, social media hashtagging, manga, proverbs, and digital or multimodal compositions).

The restrictions may seem reasonable at first glance, or they may simply seem “obvious”: of course a writing exam should require “good English,” right? But advanced writers need to remember that since genres are embedded in a social context, it's always appropriate to ask whether the features are improving rather than impeding communication, and whether *everyone* in a community benefits from the current genre approach. We need to stay skeptical and to keep track of what is kept unwritten or unseen.

In extreme cases, genres can be deliberately designed to exclude some perspectives or even to limit resources and cause direct harm.

- Application forms that allow one to become a legal, certified voter in the US have a long history (and an enduring present) of appearing to be “neutral” while being deliberately designed to require categories of information to which some citizens—especially people who are Black, poor,

elderly, or with a recent immigration status—have limited or no access, specifically to exclude those people from exercising their right as voters.

- School dress code policies in the US are often explicitly designed to promote fairness and equity, yet they often implicitly or explicitly define “neutral” dress as what is familiar to White, Christian men; common checklists that focus attention on hairstyles, head-coverings, and precise neckline or hem heights can unjustly increase the punishments faced by Blacks; by Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs; and by female or transgender students.

There is always room to debate whether it is the *genre features*—such as the agreed-upon structure, the acceptable evidence or style, the typical questions or categories included (or omitted), the most common images or arrangement of text—or the specific *content* of a document that is causing exclusion or harm. Perhaps the genre is innocent, and the individual writer is bending the content it to harmful use. Perhaps the individual writer is also generally well intentioned, but the social system in which they are writing (such as a school district that is trying to avoid lawsuits from parents concerned about how students dress and interact) is severely flawed. But reflective writers know that when multiple writers repeat content in a pattern, they create a genre where that pattern comes to be expected; to limit harm, we need to look for ways to break up a racist or discriminatory genre pattern and to invite other writers to join us.

Since genres can limit communication or even extend systemic racism or discrimination, advanced writers need to be ready to critique or adapt patterns when necessary. You might begin by changing the way you work with a genre in your courses or your workplace (see more later in this chapter on *adapting* genres). You might take your critique public to help change the use of genres more generally: for instance, if your workplace is still using lengthy quarterly reports that restate data available elsewhere (and that few people read all the way through), you might recommend a shorter report pattern that could increase cross-unit communication. Likewise, you may be concerned about how standardized writing exams ignore many other kinds of writing that have equal or greater value, and so may obscure the talents of some writers. You may not be able to change your instructor’s mind by yourself, but you can join with others in a national conversation about teaching and testing writing.

Of course, writers should always evaluate the options and consequences of adapting or critiquing a genre. Stepping away from audience expectations does not happen without consequence; the not-scary-enough horror film writer, for instance, may see the effects of audience uneasiness with the genre-bending film via their artistic reputation or their annual income. The risks and consequences are likely to be higher for writers from marginalized positions. As a writer you might decide that the consequences of nonconformity are worth the risk; you might decide to seek allies or middle-ground routes to strengthen your position;

or you might decide to temporarily work within the expectations of the genre while waiting for a better opportunity to critique it.

Meanwhile, White writers and others from more powerful positions can use genre awareness to enact a commitment to anti-racism and justice. You may advocate for a broader range of genres to be considered acceptable for accomplishing writers' goals and readers' needs in a classroom, a community organization, or a workplace. When you identify genre features in a project you're working on that may disadvantage or exclude other readers or writers without improving the opportunity for communication, you can modify the genre in your own writing and encourage others to value new approaches to successful writing. As a writer, you can continue to help redesign genres you commonly encounter, while as a reader, you can voice your interests in inclusive features to help genres evolve toward equity and justice.

Explore 13.3



Choose a genre that you think you know better than many others in your classroom, office, or community: this can be a school or professional genre like chemistry report or performance review, or it can be a genre you use or see more in your personal life like diary entry, travel-site review, telenovela, song lyrics, or social media video. Describe a couple of major genre elements: ones that many people know or that are must-haves in defining that genre. Then describe one or two less obvious features or tips for being successful that insiders know: do these always work the same way, or do the best writers vary or adapt them? Finally, consider how this genre includes or limits participants or perspectives. What's one way you could alter the media, structure, evidence, style, or language of a project you would compose in this genre so that it might be more inclusive?

Learn



- To learn more about how writers can decide whether to **accept or challenge** readers' discriminatory expectations, see [Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits](#).
- To learn more about the **limits of Standard Edited American English** as a measure of writing quality, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).

13.3 Exploring Genres Within Disciplines

Genres are inseparable from communities: they arise from and continue to shape the community. When a community or group has strong interests in how its members communicate knowledge to one another, scholars may identify it as a discourse community, like the communities of historians or engineers described earlier. You may belong to several formal or informal groups that use

some specialized, insider language, which is one sign of a discourse community: think of your friends who follow sports or who knit, who breed dogs or record music, who follow geocache trails or read science fiction novels, and how they talk and write to one another.

In a school or professional situation, you also belong to one or more communities that are based in inquiry and action: a field, profession, or discipline. Understanding how your disciplinary community adopts and uses genres is crucial to communicating successfully with others in that group.

Writers belong to disciplines, professions, and civic communities

Advanced writers are likely to belong to one or more of three types of powerful discourse communities:

- An academic discourse community, often called a field or **discipline**, which is defined by the fields of knowledge that members inquire about, the questions they pursue, the evidence they value, and how they communicate this knowledge to one another
- A workplace discourse community or **profession**, which is defined by the knowledge and goals that members value, and how they communicate with one another and with their customers or clients
- A public or **civic** discourse community, which may be defined by location (people who live in one town) but is also defined by the need to gather and communicate knowledge to solve problems faced by the community in the long or short term

Although individual readers or sub-groups within a community will have distinct preferences, they will also share with the larger community an appreciation and sometimes even an expectation for some key genres of writing. However, members of a community don't always clearly communicate their preferences to outsiders or newcomers. As an advanced writer, you will benefit from developing your own skills at identifying these genre patterns—and the inquiry and reasoning patterns they correlate with—and using them appropriately in your own writing.

Discourse communities have shared values

A discipline, profession, or civic community is a large, multifaceted, often ambiguous entity with boundaries that can be difficult to determine. Yet even when the community members don't publish a *Guide to Writing in the Field of Wetlands Ecology*, they have distinct and predictable preferences about ideas and writing that result from their association with one another and their commitment to the values of the community. Just as you can identify your own stance as a writer, you

can identify some key community values to help you predict the community's preferred genres.

What *ideas* do people in the community value? In academic communities in particular, genres are designed to help solve particular knowledge problems efficiently: people in humanities fields tend to focus their inquiry on performances or texts, those in social sciences fields analyze people or organizations, and those in science or technical fields study measurable objects, processes, or events. When you know what information your community values, you can direct your inquiry and your focus to meet those needs, and select genres and styles that best display that knowledge.

What *evidence* do people in the community value? Writers are often asked to “show, not just tell” their ideas, to better inform and persuade readers. But the standards of evidence change based on a community's needs. The participants in your I♥Poodles social media group need pictures, while the veterinarians at the hospital where you're interning rely on exact numbers from blood tests. When you know what evidence your community values, you can predict what genres and genre features will help you to explain and argue your points more successfully.

What *relationships* do people in the community value? A community group that needs to raise money or build coalitions may need to establish a wide range of connections (and will operate in a request mode), while a group that focuses on bringing information in to its membership base will have fewer outside connections (and will operate in an expertise mode). When you know who your community is trying to reach or persuade, you can adapt your genre and your style to meet those readers' needs.

What *attitudes* do people in the community value? Although it is possible for a workplace to feel like “Casual Friday” every day but require all written communication to take place using precise, formal memos produced every Tuesday by noon, that scenario is unlikely. The community's attitudes about formality, innovation, diligence, efficiency or collaboration will also influence thinking and writing patterns. When you know whether your community values speed more than depth, or correctness more than innovation, you can match your document design and key sentences to their genre expectations.

As a reflective writer, you need to be able to step into a new situation and determine how to proceed. Even though writers often need to fail and then revise, we

are more effective when we thoughtfully predict readers' needs from the start. If you can locate a model document, you may be able to analyze it to see what readers expect. When you have participated in a field or workplace for a while, you may learn common patterns and understand what they involve: *literature review*, *methods section*, *stakeholder overview*, *talking points memo*, *quarterly data summary*, *FAQ page*, *artist's note*. When you don't have experience or a clear model, though, analyzing the community's shared values can help you assess what kinds of writing patterns will help you succeed as a writer.

Writers compose within and across disciplines

At many colleges and universities, students receive valuable instruction in writing for particular academic disciplines or fields. If you are part of such a program, you may learn strategies for identifying genres and typical strategies for large discipline clusters such as “social sciences,” or you may take a class designed to focus your attention more specifically on “Research Methods and Writing for Biologists.” Instructors and assignments in these classes should help you understand the core values of the community or communities you are studying and help you practice the writing patterns that emerge from those values.

As you gain proficiency in these disciplinary patterns, you can move from general to more specific and flexible understanding of writing “in a discipline”:

- **Identify values:** writers adapt to the writing patterns of sub-disciplines. Within “biology,” botanists and neurobiologists and paleontologists have different values about what ideas, evidence, and relationships are important, and their thinking and writing patterns will diverge from one another.
- **Integrate values:** writers who collaborate across disciplines—or work in a field that is already multidisciplinary such as ecology or cybersecurity—adapt and combine patterns. A team trying to lower the amount of lead in urban housing may comprise a chemist, an engineer, and a city planner. When members of that team begin to write grant proposals and reports, they will need to draw on patterns from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, and adapt those genres for multiple audiences.
- **Adjust values:** writers prepare for new writing patterns. As professionals move into the middle of the twenty-first century, experts predict that not only will they move from one job to another, but they will move into jobs that have not been invented yet. When your parents were born, nobody had the job of “social media manager.” Next year, you may be writing for a new boss or in a new field; in twenty years, you may be writing holographic brain-feeds for an orbiting space station corporation. But the writing will still happen in genres—in patterns that writers predict and readers expect—and so you can benefit from enhancing your genre-awareness skills.

As an advanced writer, you remember that it's crucial to be thinking about *how you are learning* to use community patterns to solve writing problems, so that you can think about how you will learn to solve the *next* writing problem based on how well you solved the most recent one.

Explore 13.4



Consider two classes you are taking this year that belong to different fields or disciplines. List two or three differences you can see between the kinds of writing that you have done for those courses. While those differences might just be due to an individual instructor's personal preferences, they might follow a larger pattern. For each difference, suggest how a community value—about ideas, evidence, relationships, or attitudes—might explain the difference you see, and help you predict ways to succeed in future writing in that discipline.

Learn



- To learn more about **reflecting to predict** how genres function, see [Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process](#).
- To learn more about using a **model document** to help identify genre features, see [Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project](#).

13.4 Planning Writing With Genres

You will need both time and practice to improve how you analyze and adapt to genres rather than just following directions or using the same strategies you used last month. It may seem easier at first just to use a single approach or formula every time—or to just shrug your shoulders and hope for the best as you compose. But successful writing is neither entirely formulaic nor entirely random: by identifying community values, genre expectations, and appropriate style choices you will strengthen your ability to predict many of the writing patterns that your readers will prefer. When you can identify the typical approaches that writers use and readers expect, you can improve your efficiency as a writer (because you can make a few key decisions that affect your whole document) and increase your success as a writer (because your writing will match more readers' expectations).

In order to predict an appropriate pattern, you often need to go past your initial impressions or the assignment directions to consider the reasons, goals, and values that are connected to a writing task. The questions below—which address community and genre choices—will help you identify patterns that you can use as you draft your document and revise your writing.

Identify patterns of document conception and dissemination

- What are usually the **goals** of this document: to explain, analyze, argue, or create change?
- What is usually the **path** of this document: does it go to one reader or group only? does it get collaborated on, revised, filed, or forwarded? is it re-read or kept available for days or weeks?
- What **media** are being used most often to distribute this document: only print, or also audio/visual or online media?

Identify patterns among document readers

- Are readers of this document usually of higher, lower, or equal **status** to the writers?
- Do readers of this document usually have more, less, or equal **knowledge** of the subject matter compared to the writers? Do they expect to be treated as if they have that amount of knowledge?
- Are readers of this document usually more, less, or equally **invested** in the subject matter compared to the writers? Are they curious about or resistant to the writers' goals?
- Are readers of this document all from the same **background** with shared values and expectations, or do they come from multiple identities and points of view that need to be included?
- Do readers of this document usually spend a lot of **time** with it or relatively little time?

Identify patterns in focus and support

- What kinds of **ideas** or questions are most commonly addressed in this community? what issues or questions are underrepresented or absent?
- How much of this document do readers expect to **summarize** what previous documents have already presented, and how much needs to be new explanation, analysis, arguments, or recommendations?
- What kinds of **evidence** are most often presented in texts in this community, and where and in what forms are they presented?

Identify patterns in organization, design, and presentation

- What **genres** are most common in this community: reports and memos, essays and narratives, blogs and newsletters?

- What **frames** a particular document in a genre: what do readers usually expect to encounter at the start and/or at the end?
- What other structural or **organizational** expectations do readers usually have for documents in this genre? What sub-parts of this document can you identify?
- What language or **style** expectations do readers usually have for documents in this genre: formal or specialized language accessible mostly to insiders? general or vivid language designed to appeal to non-specialists or outsiders?

Identify opportunities for variance and/or critique

- How have documents or projects in this community **changed** over time? What innovations can you see in recent documents shared in the group?
- What features of common genres or projects most allow for **author voice or creative expression** to distinguish one document from another, or to encourage a new trend or subgroup?
- To what degree do **diverse participants** in this community have or need a powerful voice to ensure that the community can grow, connect, and move toward equity and justice?

Explore 13.5



Take a look at an assignment prompt or instructions for a writing task you have encountered recently, and write two, three-sentence genre predictions. Write the first prediction about “what readers want” from a genre you are fairly confident about, based on the instructions or your previous knowledge: be sure to include some information about at least three of the categories listed here. Write the second prediction about a genre that you don’t know for sure, but that you can deduce a reasonable plan for based on what you know about the community values or the likely genre. For each category in a task, you might write a prediction like this one: “In this task/assignment of ____, for a genre of ____, I can predict that readers will expect a feature such as ____, because I read/know/deduce that ____.”

Learn



- To learn more about **organizational patterns** that get used in many genres, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing as a Writer](#).
- To learn more about **patterns of development** that get used in many genres, such as summary, explanation, analysis, or argumentation, see [Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves](#).
- To learn more about **sentence-level patterns** that get used in many genres, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).

13.5 Adapting and Revising Genres as You Write

As you plan and write, you may find that you need to adapt a genre in order to better reach your readers—or you may need to critique and revise that genre in more substantial ways in order to communicate effectively. When you feel that your goals or your readers’ needs are severely compromised by a writing pattern, you can decide whether your and your readers’ expectations can best be met by modifying the current genre or deciding to move to a new one.

Follow or adapt a genre

In a school or work situation, you might feel that your power relationship by default prevents you from any alteration to an assigned genre, and in some cases you will be correct. Many instructors or managers want you to learn a conventional pattern well enough that you can reproduce it successfully by habit, without variation. If this seems too restrictive, remember that predictable patterns help readers as well as writers. So rather than get frustrated by having to “stick to the formula,” keep thinking about how you are saving your readers time and energy by putting key information in a place and style they are used to—like putting the dishes away in the same cabinet or using simple sentences to talk to your two-year-old cousin.

However, you should never assume that you are prohibited from asking questions about what is expected or suggesting alternative strategies. Writers who are familiar with a genre may not have thought to describe everything they know about it when they assign it to you, just as you don’t always describe all the details when you give directions on how to get to your house, so asking questions can help everyone fill in the missing pieces.

There are no rules about when writers have opportunities to modify a writing pattern. A pattern established by a national agency for submitting a grant proposal may seem absolutely necessary for you to follow when the stakes are high: any variation could put your proposal in the rejection pile. In other situations, though, you may have more leeway, especially if you pay attention to readers’ key expectations. A “five-paragraph essay,” despite its name, isn’t mostly defined by having five paragraphs, but by providing an early, direct goal statement, using closed-form paragraphs, and providing specific evidence throughout. If you write six or seven body paragraphs that succinctly but thoroughly address issues you predicted in your introduction, and they link smoothly to one another, readers may hardly notice the extra portion—and they might even appreciate the additional evidence.

Two kinds of questions may serve you particularly well in deciding when to follow and when to adapt a writing pattern. You might ask your instructor, a co-worker, or a mentor in your community.

- Questions about **priorities** come in two parts: “Which of these guidelines/expectations/features would you say are most important for success in this document?” and a follow-up, “If ____ is a little less important, is there any opportunity to write it differently?” Whether or not an instructor agrees that you may write parts of a document differently right now, learning about the priority of features will help you complete risk-benefit analyses in the future.
- **If-then** questions help you consider exact scenarios: “If I’m writing ____, then would it be ok to ____ this time?” Some assignments or workplace tasks may not have room for you to improvise—but if the assignment is designed to have you directly affect an audience in or beyond the classroom, your instructor or supervisor may recognize that writers can require additional flexibility in how they use writing patterns.

After some practice, you should be able to predict reasonable answers on your own, and grant yourself some freedom to adapt a writing pattern to serve your and your readers’ needs.

Critique and revise a genre

In writing as in other endeavors, your odds of success as a genre-bender or genre-breaker increase significantly if you act with awareness of the risks and benefits. If you haven’t studied the patterns in your community or for your genre, you might do the writing equivalent of showing up unwittingly on Casual Friday wearing a wool suit and freshly polished shoes, thereby sending a message that you don’t really want to belong to the community.

But it’s not always true that “you have to know the rules to break them”—you see examples every day of people who break rules they never knew existed, and some of them intuitively or luckily gain success through such unplanned innovation. And in some situations, the rules aren’t the most important objective: you don’t have to spend many Saturday afternoons watching six-year-olds play soccer to see how much sheer joy can be had from thirty minutes in which nearly as many rules and guidelines are broken as are kept.

Moreover, you know that genres *aren’t rules*: they were designed and evolved within communities of people who were no smarter than you are, and the genre strategies may at this point exist as much through writers’ and readers’ habits and familiarity with the genre as by any active valuing of the patterns and features. As a reflective writer, you are likely to encounter more and more instances in which you need to directly critique or change a writing pattern altogether. You may see that a genre is limiting the writers who have access to it, limiting the readers who engage with it, or limiting the messages and actions it is supposed to promote.

- A four-part report can be easy for everyone to agree upon out of habit, but if it is too long for an office filled with new workers who need quick instructions, or too short for an office that is taking on a complicated year-long project, then that genre is interfering with communication.
- A beautifully designed company homepage that becomes long scrolls of text when viewed on smartphones is no longer functioning as a successful genre.
- An adoption home study narrative that does not include an autobiography option, so that families in an increasingly diverse community can represent their beliefs in their own words, may use a genre that limits important cross-cultural understanding among families, social workers, and adoption agencies.

Because advanced writers know that genre patterns are built on agreements and expectations rather than rules, we can critique the ineffective or discriminatory approaches and then suggest changes that will match readers' expectations while adapting to their changing needs. You can improve the lives of writers and readers alike by proposing changes and demonstrating the benefits of a new, dynamic agreement about how documents will function in a repeated situation. Your attention to underlying values lets you become a genre creator rather than only a follower.

Your 25-page sociology senior class team project is supposed to be written entirely in the advanced, technical language used by senior scholars in the field, using an IMRaD structure. This approach would help you support ongoing research in the field. But everyone on your team wants to move into public clinical practice, and you believe that you should use the first two pages for an overview of the results, written in language that nurses, counselors, and clients could understand, so that you gain practice explaining key ideas to a range of audiences. Since many social workers consult with non-specialist colleagues or clients, this modification aligns with core values in the field without compromising the goals of the main document.

Your teacher colleagues write short pieces for your elementary school's online newsletter that generally features stories about individual students who win prizes, accomplish goals, or create fascinating projects, with photos of smiling students that convey the positive social atmosphere of the school. You've noticed that a number of your students' parents work in the local research and technology firms; since you predict that they might value more factual data, you submit a story that includes two colorful charts instead of photos. One chart shows improvement in reading scores, and one shows an increase in student satisfaction with their reading choices; you also

include a couple of quotations from students. Since one community goal is to convey students' success to their parents in terms they can understand, your modification aligns with that core value without abandoning the "personal touch" that photos bring.

The town clinic you work for is run by medical doctors and requires you to complete client intake reports and progress reports that focus on questions about physical health rather than mental health or family issues, a pattern that makes sense within a traditional medical community. However, it may not help clinic workers acquire enough information to align their work with best practices in integrated health care. At your monthly team meeting, you propose adding sections to every report that address clients' mental health and family status, in order to expand clinicians' thinking and build team cohesion. Since those improvements will better serve your clients, your changes align with your clinic's core values.

In each of these cases, a thinking-and-writing pattern had resisted change even when change might be useful. Your critique of the pattern and suggestion of a new one, linked to values that your colleagues, supervisors, and/or clients share, will help everyone become better writing problem solvers.

Explore 13.6



Imagine that you have been hired as the Media Coordinator for a small professional organization—perhaps this is a charity or community group that supports a goal you believe in, or perhaps it is a professional organization that provides information to specialists in your field. Because the organization hasn't hired a writing expert before, they are relying mostly on two writing patterns: a one-page casual letter that they send or email to members each month, and a 15-page formal operations report (with lots of charts) that they post in their online archives twice a year. Identify your (real or imagined) organization, and then, in 3-4 sentences, explain *why* one of these documents should be adapted or revised to improve communication, and suggest a few steps of *how* those changes could be done.

Practice



- To practice **predicting** the expectations for a genre, see [Advertisement Analysis](#), [Audience Profile](#), or [Genre Ethnography](#).
- To practice **analyzing** the features of documents in a genre, see [Genre Triple Log](#) or [Remix/Mashup](#).
- To practice **adapting** your writing to a genre, see [Diction Flexer](#), [Genre Switch](#), or [Stance Switch](#).

Learn



- To learn more about **thesis or goal statements** that anchor documents in many genres, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **locating evidence** that will be appropriate for your genre and your readers, see [Chapter 20, Middle Inquiry: Finding, Evaluating, and Working With Information](#).