

Chapter 3. Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres

Several times in my research over the years, I have noticed letters playing a role in the emergence of distinctive genres: the early scientific article emerging from the correspondence of Hans Oldenburg, the first editor of the *Philosophic Transactions of the Royal Society*; the patent, originally known as letters patent; stockholders' reports evolving from letters to stockholders; and internal corporate reporting and record forms regularizing internal corporate correspondence.¹

I was not the first to notice any of these; however, in putting the four cases together, it struck me that these may be part of a more general pattern. As I pursued the thought that letters might have a special role in genre formation, many other examples of genres with strong connections to correspondence came to my attention, including newspapers and other periodicals, financial instruments such as bills of exchange and letters of credit, books of the New Testament, papal encyclicals, and novels. The letter, in its directness of communication between two parties within a specific relationship in specific circumstances (all of which could be commented on directly), seemed to provide a flexible medium out of which many functions, relationships, and institutional practices might develop—making new uses socially intelligible at the same time as allowing the form of the communication to develop in new directions.

This essay is a preliminary attempt to develop this speculation; however, it is little more than a speculation inviting further research into a wide-ranging subject that presents several difficulties. While the histories of various domains of literate practice have each been the subject of scholarship, only a few have undergone formal genre analysis, and few have been carefully examined with respect to the relationship to letters. Further, the story of each domain is complex and extensive, involving many countries, influences, and events. Finally, the earliest documents that might show the strongest influence of letters are not extant or readily available. Nonetheless, the sketchy and scattered evidence I have found in the secondary literature suggests that letters may have a pervasive and important influence in the formation of genres.

Where do genres come from?

The current panoply of genres in modern life relies on writers and readers

1. This chapter originally appeared as “Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres,” by C. Bazerman, 2000, in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, edited by D. Barton & N. Hall, pp. 15–30, John Benjamins Publishing, (<https://doi.org/10.1075/swll.9.02baz>). Copyright 2000 by John Benjamins Publishing. Reprinted with permission.

having complex social and institutional knowledge of the activities that genres mediate. Interpreting even the most ordinary junk mail solicitation for a credit card requires an understanding among other things of the postal system, folded paper envelopes, advertising and direct mailing, promised inducements, the modern bank and credit card system, modern application forms, store credit card transactions, monthly statements, internal record keeping, check payments, and competition among various credit providers. Genres help us navigate the complex worlds of written communication and symbolic activity because in recognizing a text type we recognize many things about the institutional and social setting, the activities being proposed, the roles available to writer and reader, the motives, ideas, ideology, and expected content of the document, and where this all might fit in our life (Bazerman, 1997; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Freedman & Medway, 1994).

But how did we even begin to imagine these genres that seem so removed from the immediacy of face-to-face talk? How did we get to this point where our daily activities are embedded in complex communicative systems that we must to some degree be familiar with in order to purchase the basics of life? How did we create these spaces of social interaction and communication so far removed from immediate face-to-face meeting?

Certainly in the early periods of literacy we had nothing like the proliferation of genres we have now. Who, sitting in the city of Uruk in the fertile crescent, could imagine a referee's report on a submission to a scientific journal? Where did the first genres of the written world come from, and how did they elaborate into the profusion we must make sense of in our lives?

Some early written genres arose directly from highly visible and well-known genres of spoken public performance, such as the epic, the communal history recited on ritual occasions, the myth, the ode, the choral performance and the drama, the speech, and lesser genres such as folktale, riddle, or joke. Transcriptions can serve as memorials for witnessed events or imaginative recreations for those who have seen similar events. The text then evokes the entire social trappings that encased the oral performance—whether the holiday gathering of citizens at the Athenian amphitheater for a poetic/dramatic competition, the sacramental gatherings at the temple in Jerusalem, or the evening story-telling to beguile children. The written text can also script reenactment of the original performance or new performances modeled on originals.² As new texts become created solely for private reading, they modify the social arrangements of their transmission but still draw on an established sense of the textual transaction. Much of what we now count as literature has its roots in such transformations of oral performances.

Similar, but a bit more exclusive and complex, are the transcription of oral discussion about knowledge and belief—as represented in the Talmud and the Platonic dialogues. Such documents carry to some extent the representation of

2. For a study of how oral performatives are transcribed in constitutive texts see Brenda Danet (1997).

the social interaction that generated or inspired them and are often reprised within local circumstances that reenact and extend the interaction they transcribe—as Talmud is studied within study groups, where the central text and written commentary trigger new discussions (see Jonathan Boyarin, 1989), or as Platonic dialogues continue to serve as the matter for undergraduate classroom discussion. Even reading such texts in private can draw one imaginatively into the represented dialectic, unless the reader is reading from some well-defined alternative perspective.

Some genres rise out of more ordinary, daily speech acts, such as counting and recalling (which, according to Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1986), provided the very origins of writing, as memorial tokens came to be transformed into clay impressions of those tokens, and then simply inscriptions in clay). This may be a personal recounting or within a small group to fix the terms of ownership or transfer. Presumably the individuals using memory tokens would also remember the specific local occasion, circumstances, purposes, and transactions of the recording. Some of our modern difficulty in interpreting early markings is that we do not have direct evidence of the circumstances and use of the marks within the circumstances.

Early Letters

The spoken commands of those in authority also were early transformed into recognizable written genres of orders, laws, codes, and proclamations, extending rule over widespread domains and periods of time, with consequences for increased accountability to abstract principles. However, even though everyone might recognize the commanding words of authority, it is difficult to know whether any particular set of commands had current legitimate authority and whether that authority, particularly at a great distance, had sufficient power and means to monitor and enforce the commands.

For such reasons in the ancient Near East and Greece, early written commands along with other military, administrative, or political business of the state were cast in the form of letters (White, 1982). Letters provided identification of author and audience, and in the earliest period were delivered by personal messenger of the authoritative person, who was said to carry the very presence or projection (*parousia*) of the sender. The apparent social drama was further enhanced as the written message was read aloud by the messenger, who might also have a second spoken message which could not be entrusted to writing. Thus the procedures of delivery of these early letters visibly enacted the social relationships that were carried out at a distance through the medium of the letter (Stirewalt, 1993, p. 5). Even when letters were no longer recited by the messenger, the goal of projecting one's presence through the writing remained (Doty, 1973, p. 12).

From these formal and official beginnings, letters came to include expressions of personal concern and then personal messages (Stowers, 1986). Such maintaining and extending of social bonds moved the relationships enacted in letters beyond

the formal and official to the personal. Personal familiar letters soon became common among all classes in the Hellenic and Roman worlds. What little attention classical rhetorical theorists did give to letters were to these personal letters, with emphasis on how letters, to be written in the style of speaking, extended the personal bond between friends and associates (Malherbe, 1988). While theorists attended only to the bonds of friendship, personal letters became a flexible means of carrying out many kinds of business and other transactions (for examples see John Lee White, 1986). Among the range of business and administrative letters were letters of petition (White, 1972) and recommendation (Kim, 1972). Fictional letters served as amusing exercises in schools and as adult entertainment; the subjects of these letters ranged from moral romances to erotica. Letters to the gods, letters to the dead, and letter prayers suggest the flexibility of the letter form to establish and elaborate communicative situations (Doty, 1973; Stirewalt, 1993, pp. 20–25).

Two kinds of letters came to be treated as scholarly documents in schools and personal libraries. First were letters on technical or professional themes, including philosophy, rhetoric, divination, mathematics and medicine. The letters of Aristotle, for example, were collected. Second were more extended letter-essays which served in the place of complete treatises—perhaps serving as a sketch or substitute for never-completed works. The letter format gave local social context and meaning into these forays into extended abstraction (Stirewalt, 1993, pp. 15–19).

In the wide-ranging uses of letters in the classical world we can see how the letter, once invented to mediate the distance between two parties, provides an open-ended transactional space that can be specified, defined, and regularized in many different ways. The communication between two known parties with an existing and known set of relationships and ongoing transactions are directly brought to mind to writer and reader through the salutation, signature, and content of the letter. Moreover, letters can and often do explicitly describe and comment on the relationship between the parties and the nature of the current transaction. As more subjects and transactions find their recognizable way into the letter, the genre itself expands and specializes, so that distinctive kinds of letters become recognizable and treated differently. People recognize increasing varieties of transactions can be accomplished at a distance through letters and will have models to follow for those kinds of transactions. As the historical scholarship has revealed, these varieties of letters became strongly typified in organization and in formulaic phrasing. In turn, transactions and organization can be extended over greater distances and the social bonds between individuals can be reinforced and even created through indirect relations with third parties (as through letters of reference).

Letters in the Early Christian Church

The richness and multiplicity of ancient letter writing practices made letters a powerful communicative force within the early Christian church. Almost all of the books of the New Testament outside the gospels are in the form of letters,

originally between specific parties or small groups and then made available for all who share in the community of the messages. These letters pursue many activities—including narratives of remarkable events, proselytizing messages, prayers, consolations, moral teachings, praises of the faithful, warnings against deceivers, philosophic thoughts, prophecies, and directives for church organization. These letters are regularly framed in forms of fellowship that reaffirm bonds of communality and faith, giving a personal cast of fellowship to the wide range of activities carried out in the New Testament.

In the early church letters were an important vehicle in maintaining the fellowship of the church over distances. Early travelers would carry letters from their bishops, introducing and making them welcome as communicants but also reaffirming the bonds of communion among bishops. Encyclical letters also circulated information about schisms and lists of which clergy remained “in communion.” As the church organization developed in the late Roman and Medieval periods these apostolic and pastoral letters would circulate doctrinal rulings, decisions of episcopal synods, along with other temporal and political matters. As the hierarchy of the church became established, papal letters on both general and specific matters became of increasing importance and became distinguished into specific kinds still in use today, including papal constitutions, bulls, briefs, encyclicals, rescripts, decrees, and personal autographs (Fremantle, 1956, pp. 23–25).

As the church expanded across distance, uniting many people, letters became important in holding the bureaucracy together and maintaining the bonds of communality (Constable, 1976). To train clerics in what was now becoming the major medium of doctrine and administration, a specialized branch of rhetoric developed known as the *ars dictaminis* (Camargo, 1991). This art of letter writing emphasized the salutation, identifying and giving respect to the social roles and statuses of the sender and receiver, and placing both within institutionalized social relations. Further, letter writers were advised to build the bond of good will with the recipient by invoking sentiment and obligation and to explicitly narrate the situation which presented the need for the letter and the recipient’s hoped for cooperation (Murphy, 1971).

The *ars dictaminis* provided the basis for expanding commercial and governmental correspondence during the early renaissance. Bologna, the center of *ars dictaminis* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was simultaneously the center of the new *ars notaria*, which in the 14th century was to displace the *ars dictaminis* in importance. The *ars notaria*, concerned with proper form of legal and commercial documents, was closely tied to the professions of notary and secretary and deeply involved in law and commerce (Murphy, 1974, pp. 263–265).

Letters and Legal Documents

The link between letters and legal documents can be seen in some of the functions letters served. Among the letters of the medieval church bureaucracy were

grants from monasteries, contractual arrangements, deeds of transfer, grants of immunities and privileges, gifts, mutual obligations, and other documents establishing some enduring administrative arrangement. Such letters would be kept to establish one's legal right when needed, so in a sense these letters were written as much for the unknown third party "to whom it may concern" as for the original recipients (Murphy, 1974, pp. 200–202; Perelman, 1991, p. 99).

I have not examined such early legal documents to determine the extent to which they had the full trappings of letters and how they might have differed from various genres of correspondence,³ but it is worth pointing out that even such a document of general legal meaning as the Magna Charta, written in 1215, follows the principles of letter writing by beginning with a salutation that defines social positions and seeks good will: "John, by the grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, count of Anjou, to the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciars, foresters, sherriffs, reeves, servants, and all bailiffs and his faithful people greeting" (Cheyney, 1896, p. 6). Then the document narratively begins by recounting what he has granted, before switching into normative claims of "shall have" and "shall not."

A later royal document I have at hand is the Letters Patent granted by King Henry VII to John Cabot license to explore and colonize new lands, dated March 5th in the eleventh year of his reign (1495), reprinted in *Hakluyt's Voyages*. Not only is it called a letter, but it has an address and salutation: "Henry by the Grace of God, king of England and France, and lord of Ireland, to all whom these presents shall come, Greeting" (Hakluyt, 1887/1907). The body, containing the specifics of the royal license, is framed as a direct message: "be it known that we have given and granted. . ." The document ends with his witness (or signature). To this day some contracts, grants, and other legal documents in Britain and America may still contain such residual epistolary formulae.

Even when patents were restricted from all grants of royal privilege to limited protection for inventions, the process was still transacted by letters and letter-like documents. The first extant application for a patent in the United States is a 1790 personal letter from William Pollard to Secretaries Jefferson and Howe and Attorney General Randolph requesting a patent for a spinning machine (United States Patent Office, 1980). The first extant grant, from 1791, is an official looking diploma cast in the form of a letter addressed "To all to whom to these Presents shall come, Greeting" and signed by both the President and the Attorney General (United States Patent Office, 1980).

Until the middle of this century in the United States, the chief patent documents maintained the format of a letter. The letter of specification within the application gradually came to stand for the patent, again maintaining the format of a letter to whom it may concern, signed by the applicant and witnesses, but further endorsed

3. For a catalogue of the genres of government documents and records of medieval England and their relation to letters see Michael T. Clanchy, 1979.

by the patent office and granted a patent number. Only in recent years have letter trappings been removed from the specification, though the patent is still legally surrounded by extensive correspondence, known as the file wrapper.

The letter of petition as a means for the individual to express personal interests to authorities extends back to the classical world (Kim, 1972) and was a regular instrument for the expression of discontent and protest in the Middle Ages and after. King George's unresponsiveness to petitions is one of the core complaints of the American Declaration of Independence.

As discontents increased, letters regularly were used to spread the rebellious attitude and perspective, to share information about outrages, and to organize acts of rebellion. Such was the case in the peasant rebellions in England in 1381 (Justice, 1994). Again, in the period leading up to the American Revolution, letters travelling between Committees of Correspondence provided the vehicle for increasing rebellious sentiment and organization. In both these examples, letters preceded the appearance of more overt public documents such as broadsides, manifestoes, and seditious pamphlets.

Letters and Financial Documents

Letters not only provided the medium for development of major genres of law, government, and politics, but also the various instruments of money and credit that mediate the modern system of banking and finance. Beginning in the 12th century in the city-states of northern Italy, including Bologna, financial instruments developed to serve the needs of growing commercial trade. The most important of documents invented at this time, generally seen as the source of all other monetary instruments, was the bill of exchange. In these bills one party acknowledged to another the receipt of a sum to be repaid at a fixed date, usually at another city. By the middle of the 13th century bills of exchange had to be certified by a notary (Groseclose, 1976, p. 93). Although I have not seen the documents themselves, they seem to be a form of business correspondence. One history of Venetian banking called the system of bill of exchanges a "network of regional and international debits and credits, held together with constant letter writing" (Lane & Mueller, 1985, p. 73).

Monetary and credit instruments, for their credibility and credit-ability, depended upon people believing in increasingly abstracted symbolic markers of value, removed from objects of concrete value and from personal trust of known individuals who act as guarantors of value. Personal letter and letter-like communications among individuals can serve as transitional roles in establishing the value as reliable. Further, trusted institutions such as banks and governments can issue and guarantee written and printed instruments of value for general circulation.

Giro banking, again established in Northern Italy during this period, was based on the direct transfer of funds from a bank account of one client to the

account of another, upon instruction of the first client. It is hard to imagine that letters authorizing such transfers would not be a regular part of the process, and it is easy to imagine such letters of transfer being implicated in the rise of checking. Documents drawn against giro accounts apparently served as an early form of paper money. In England the first paper money established as legal tender in 1665 was in the form of “an order to the Teller of the Receipt of the Exchequer to pay such and such a person so much money out of the fund arising from this or that Parliamentary supply” (Groseclose, 1976, p. 117). The name alone of the letter of credit itself suggests the closeness of the link to correspondence, although I have not been able to find substantial information about its history.

The greatest experiment in paper money, or notes, developed in the North American colonies due to a lack of gold and silver coin. Massachusetts was the first to issue notes in 1690, and other colonies followed suit in following decades (Groseclose, 1976, p. 119; Hickcox, 1866/1969, pp. 5–6; Phillips, 1865/1969). The typical form of such notes has some of trappings of the letter; for example, the first notes issued by the Colony of New York in 1709 are dated at the top and are signed at the bottom by one or several government officials. The text reads,

This indented bill of . . . Shillings due from the colony of New York to the Possessor thereof, shall be, in Value equal to Money; and shall be accordingly accepted by the treasurer of this Colony, for the time being in all publick Payment; and for any Fund at any Time, in the Treasury . . . [dated, by order of] (Hickcox, 1866/1969, pp. 5–6)

The direct order to the treasurer has been transformed into a normative description that “the treasurer will accept,” thereby allowing the document to be addressed to the unidentified users rather than the government official. This transformation may explain some of the loss of trappings of the direct letter. To this day the U.S. Dollar contains some residual and transformed elements of the letter in the signature and the normative description “This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private” which serves as promise to the user and order to the recipient. British notes are also signed and “promise to pay the bearer the sum of. . .”

Letters and the Origins of Newspapers, Scientific Journals, and the Novel

The introduction of printing multiplied copies of texts for extended and ultimately unknown audiences. The letter in several instances appears to have served as a transitional form to allow genres to emerge with some sense of defined communicative task with some moorings of social relationship. At least three major types of writing that flourished in print culture seem to have some connection with letter correspondence: Newspapers, scientific journals, and the novel.

The oral and written sources of the newspaper seem multiple, including word of mouth and ballads, Roman and Italian daily reports, and Renaissance broadsides and occasional pamphlets. Even as early as the latter half of the 15th century, professional correspondents gathered around the Inns of Court to write newsletters for the gentry in the provinces (Andrews 1968; Bourne 1887; Raymond, 1996, p. 5). The Fugger family in Europe also had a chain of correspondents to provide commercial news (Sommerville, 1996, p. 19). Inspired by some earlier continental examples, in England by the 1620s Corantos appeared regularly. The reports regularly referred to correspondence as a source of the information, as in “We understand by Letters . . .” and “They write from . . .” (Sommerville, 1996, p. 25). The editors, most notoriously Gainsford, adopted a personal style directly addressing the readers (Sommerville, 1996, pp. 25–26).

In January 1643 with England in full rebellion, the need for news was great. Two additional forms of news periodicals appeared—the *Mercuries*, drawing on the reputation of the first continental periodical, and *Intelligencers*, drawing the title from private newsletters of the sort prepared at the Inns of Court, suggesting confidential and secret information. Some of these newsletters themselves were gathered and printed in newsbooks, such as Samuel Pecke’s *The Heads of Several Proceedings in this Present Parliament*, which ran for three months (Sommerville, 1996, pp. 35–36).

While I cannot here begin to trace out the complex history of the forms of journalistic writing, I want to point out that trappings of letters still remain in the journalism industry, as reporters posted in distant cities and countries are still referred to correspondents, even on television news. Further, the byline remains to identify noteworthy acts of correspondence. Remnants of personal correspondence style remain particularly in those publications that affect antiquarian elegance, such as the *New Yorker* which still publishes lengthy reports with titles such as “Letter from . . .” and maintains an informal letter style for the “Talk of the Town” column.

Non-news periodical publication is generally traced back to the earliest scientific journals, the short-lived *Journal des Scavans* and the enduring *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, both first appearing in 1665 (Hall, 1965; Hall & Hall, 1965–1986). In the mid-17th century an active correspondence had developed among natural philosophers to share their investigations. The *Philosophical Transactions* grew out of this letter correspondence. German born Hans Oldenburg in the latter part of the 1650s, after having taken up residence in Britain, began correspondence with prominent men of learning, ranging of Massah ben Israel and John Milton to Robert Boyle and John Hartlib. The correspondence with natural philosophers soon overtook Oldenburg’s other interests. Although he himself had little background in natural philosophy and did not add new findings or theories, he passed about information between others. As a result of this active correspondence in 1662 he became the secretary of the recently formed Royal Society. In this role his correspondence increased further and in 1665 he

used his correspondence as the material for a new journal, the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*.

The earliest issues of this journal were largely in the form of a summary of his correspondence along with the meetings of the Royal Society, as though Oldenburg were corresponding with the readers, passing on all he has found from a variety of sources. Soon, however, he started to quote at length from his correspondents, and the articles appear directly in the form of letters to the Royal Society. Thus Isaac Newton's famous 1672 article on "A New Theory of Light and Colors" appears in letter form, which letter had been previously read to a meeting of the Royal Society. A controversy broke out over this theory, generating letters among numerous correspondents, whom Newton regularly answered. Much of this correspondence, written for the journal audience, was published over the next five years in the *Philosophical Transactions* (Bazerman, 1988).

Letters in the *Philosophical Transactions* increasingly oriented towards the readership of the journal as its primary audience, rather than the nominal recipients of the letters. In this process of reorientation, a tension developed between the assertiveness, didactiveness, and disputatiousness of public argument and the gentility, politeness, and goodwill of personal correspondence among gentleman (Atkinson, 1999; Shapin, 1994). It took well over a century for the articles to drop vestiges of the letter format and adopt the abstract argumentative tone and focus of scientific articles. Letters still retain several important roles in scientific publication both for direct response to previous articles and as a forum for less formal, more rapid publication of important results. Indeed, the need for brief and rapid sharing of new results has led to letter journals, like *Physical Review Letters* (Blakeslee, 1994).

In addition to many scientific journals proliferating from the early model of the *Philosophical Transactions*, a variety of literary and intellectual journals were born in the 18th century (Graham, 1926/1972), and from them proliferated the popular journals of the 19th century.

The origins of the novel are complex and under continuing critical scrutiny (see for examples J. Paul Hunter, 1990, and Michael McKeon, 1987). It is clear, however, that the epistolary novel was one of the first forms of extended prose fiction written for print. It is further clear that the epistolary novel grew immediately out of several traditions of letter writing and letter writing manuals, including the print collections of actual letters. The tradition of literary letters went back to the Roman exemplars of Pliny and Cicero and continued most notably by the eighth-century monk Alcuin and the 14th-century poet Petrarch; such letters had been collected and widely disseminated long before Gutenberg. In England, some families chronicled their lives and times in letters that projected the particulars and personality of the correspondents; two extensive collections are those of the Stonor family (1290–1483) and the Paston family (1424–1526). Additionally, fictional letters in the classical world, including some by Ovid, served for both education and amusement. Finally, letter writing manuals and love letter collections began being published in the 16th century, often presenting fictional exemplary

letters, ranging from the amusing to the didactic. Nicholas Breton's *Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1603) gained particular popularity (Singer, 1963).

Letters and Corporate, Commercial Documents

While there were no doubt many more genres in which letters had a formative role, I will jump ahead to two examples of late 19th-century commerce where the growth of corporate enterprises was creating the need for new forms of extended communication among people who may have been personal strangers but were in some structured relation to each other. First is the Letter to Stockholders. At least in the United States the latter part of the 19th century witnessed the growth of large corporations, triggered by transportation and communication technologies that created national markets. Transportation and communication companies were in fact some of the first large enterprises. These endeavors needed capital, which they obtained through the sale of equities. With such dispersed ownership, unable to witness the daily operations of the company or to inspect the books, the management needed means to report to and reassure the investors about the value of their investment. While I have not examined a wide range of early stock reports, nor do I have any detailed picture of their development as a form, the examples I have seen from the early 1880s for the Edison Electric Light Company, the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of New York, and the Edison Company for Isolated Lighting are all in the form of letters from the Board of Trustees to the stockholders, signed by the President of the respective company. After the first couple of years, a short financial statement was added. To this day, although the annual stock report of major companies is now likely to be a thick, glossy book with figures tables, photographs, and many sections, a letter to the stockholders from the company president and/or the Chair of the Board usually appears near the beginning to convey the overall condition of the company to the stockholders.

Similarly, within the daily operations of the rapidly expanding companies there were increasing needs for internal and external communication at a distance. At first the business letter carried out the necessary communications. The increased need for efficiency in keeping records and files generated by the expanding correspondence led to the development of printed forms, memos, reports, circulars, and other genres. This went hand in hand with the development of office technology such as typewriters, stencil duplicating machines, carbon paper, and the filing cabinet (Yates, 1989). That is, the business letter proliferated into new genres which became part of daily operations and part of permanent company records. The regularization of the documents and paper flows also served to regulate the work of new classes of white-collar workers (see also Olivier Zunz, 1990).

In examining the Edison papers several times I came across this process of genre formation in action, suggesting how the flexibility, personal judgment, and bonds of personal trust were weakened as paper work became increasingly organized around restricted genres controlled by pre-printed forms (Bazerman,

1999). One example stands out in its clarity. In 1884 Alfred O. Tate went on a canvassing trip to Michigan and Canada, searching for central power station sites. He regularly reported back to Charles Batchelor, one of Edison's closest and most trusted partners, concerning information about the agents contracted and the towns in which they were considering developing central stations. For the first ten days he wrote personal letters, often of two pages that mixed legal and business reports with personal judgments and other personal matters. He typically used the stationery of the hotel he was staying at. However, about two weeks into the process he began using pre-printed forms (identified as form 6) that had Edison company information, specific places for the contractual legal information and background information on the locally contracted agent, and a residual space for "Remarks." By being regularized in a form, these letters became more of legal and business documents directed towards a company file. Immediately upon adopting these forms Tate's comments became more limited in scope and length and his reporting task narrowed. On the other hand, the company was assured uniformity of information and regularity of filing procedures.

Because the sociality of texts is often a matter of implicit social understanding embedded in our recognition of genres that shape communicative activity, reading and writing have regularly been mistaken as autonomous processes of pure form and meaning, separate from social circumstances, relationships, and actions. Letters, compared to other genres, may appear humble, because they are so overtly tied to particular social relations of particular writers and readers, but that only means they reveal to us so clearly and explicitly the sociality that is part of all writing—they give the game away so easily. But that may be the very reason that letters have been so instrumental in the formation of more specialized and less self-interpreting genres. Letters have helped us find the addresses of many obscure and remarkable places for literate meetings and have helped us figure out what we would do and say once we got there.

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