

## 2 Explaining Genre Theory

The uses of genre theory that help it address instructional challenges underscore the new way genre is being defined. More than classifying a "kind" of writing—poetry, a novel, or a letter, for instance—at its heart, genre theory emphasizes the idea that writing is socially constructed. Carolyn R. Miller's landmark 1984 article "Genre as Social Action" is credited with extending the traditional definition of genre in ways that opened new avenues of thought. She argues that genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159). Her emphasis is on the "action [a genre] is used to accomplish" (151) rather than the form a genre takes or even the situation in which it arises.

But that was just the beginning; her idea led to new ways of considering genres. A more thorough explanation is complicated, because, in the end, the theory isn't unified. It's genre theories—plural—and they begin with trying to define genres.

### DEFINING GENRES

"Genres pervade lives. People use them, consciously and unconsciously, creatively and formulaically, for social functions and individual purposes, with critical awareness and blind immersion, in the past and yet today. They shape our experiences, and our experiences shape them. As we study and teach these ways of acting symbolically with others, we may be approaching an understanding not just of genres but of the messy, complex ways that human beings get along in their worlds" (Devitt, *Writing* 219).

Perhaps *messy* and *complex* are two perfect words to begin to define genres as current theories conceive of them. Defining *genre* has become very difficult, partly because, as Paul W. Richardson notes, "a perfectly useful word has now been so expanded in meaning as to render it imprecise" (124–25). Anis Bawarshi shows that, even in looking at the etymology, the word is challenging. He notes that *genre* comes from Latin cognates through French, "suggest[ing] that genres *sort* and *generate*" (Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff 550). In other words, genres can both arrange what exists and produce something else, something that might not have existed before. The origin of the word reveals a hint of genres' complexity, showing that they are capable of multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory, actions.

expanded to  
inaccuracy

etymology

To explain genres, then, it might be simpler to start with what they are not. Many educators still consider genres as "(a) primarily literary, (b) entirely defined by textual regularities in form and content, (c) fixed and immutable, and (d) classifiable into neat and mutually exclusive categories and sub-categories" (Freedman and Medway, "Introduction" 1). Instead, today, genres represent all sorts of interactions (some textual and some not), are defined more by situation than form, are both dynamic and flexible, and are more an explanation of social interaction than a classification system.

**Genres Are Not Only about Literary Texts Anymore.** In fact, Bazerman indicates that considering genres only from a literary perspective has reduced the recognition of their social aspect: "Because literature is often written and read in contemplative circumstances, apparently (but not thoroughly) removed from immediate exigencies of life, the social embeddedness of genre has been less visible" ("The Life" 20). Thus, although literature also responds to a social context, it is such an abstract one that we often fail to recognize it. Because genres today are more defined by their social situations, genres include all interactions involving texts. In fact, everyday texts, more than literary ones, are often a focus of current genre study.

**Genres Are More Than Forms.** Although, as Anthony Paré and Graham Smart acknowledge, "repeated patterns in the structure, rhetorical moves, and style of texts are the most readily observable aspects of genre" (147), these observable features do not, by themselves, constitute a genre. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway explain that regularities in form come from the situation, instead of existing without reason: "Genres have come to be seen as typical ways of engaging rhetorically with recurring situations. The similarities in textual form and substance are seen as deriving from the similarity in the social action undertaken" ("Introduction" 2). Bazerman extends the explanation, showing that forms not only come from situations but also guide us through situations: "Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life. . . . Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar" ("Life" 19). And Marilyn L. Chapman affirms the others' assertions about form's relation to genre: "Rather than rules to be followed . . . or models to be imitated . . . , genres are now being thought of as cultural resources on which writers draw in the process of writing for particular purposes and in specific situations" (469). So, although form is an aspect of genre, form does not define a genre.

Cultural Resources

**Genres Are Not Fixed.** Because genres are responses to social situations (and situations are always changing), genres cannot be fixed. At the same time, as noted previously, they are not totally without regularity either. As Devitt explains, "genres, then, are not arbitrary or random, being tied to rhetorical and social purposes and contexts, but neither are they necessary and inevitable, being shaped by various influences at various times" ("Language Standard" 47). Genres are stable, but not unchanging. They may share characteristics over time or in different situations—in fact, a certain amount of stability is essential for genres to carry out action—but they are never exactly the same because no two situations are exactly the same.

**Genres Are Not Sortable into Precise Categories nor Are They Classification Systems.** Humans can't help but see similarities between responses to situations—special occasions may warrant a greeting card, for instance. But selecting an appropriate greeting card depends partly on the situation—birthday, graduation, death, Mother's Day—so they can't be all the same genre. Even for the same occasion—Mother's Day, for example—a variety of possible responses (cards) is available: sweet, sappy, sentimental, humorous, and so on, depending on the individuals' relationship, and cards can be for birth mothers, adoptive mothers, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers. Because of this connection to situation, Devitt asserts that although classification is an "essential part of understanding genre . . . such classification is defined rhetorically, rather than critically, by the people who use it" (*Writing* 9). Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior agree: classification is more a matter of people attempting to locate and generate genres than of people assigning genres to categories ("Participating" 143). In this way, rhetorically and socially, genres have aspects that allow classification, but not in the traditional sense of being a label for a category by which texts can be identified.

So if genres are not forms, not fixed, not only about literary texts, and not classification systems, what are they? Gunther Kress defines them by their process of development: "In any society there are regularly recurring situations in which a number of people interact to perform or carry out certain tasks. Where these are accompanied by language of whatever kind, the regularity of the situation will give rise to regularities in the texts which are produced in that situation" ("Genre as Social" 27). So they are texts developed in and responding to recurring situations. That's at the center of genre theory. But theorists are continuing to enlarge the concept. As Bawarshi maintains, "we oversimplify genres when we define them *only* as the typified rhetorical ways in which individuals function within socially defined and a priori recurrent situations" ("Genre

Function" 356; emphasis added). Paré and Smart separate out the functions Bawarshi mentions and describe genre as having "a distinctive profile of regularities across four dimensions" (146). These dimensions include (1) the texts themselves, (2) the processes used to compose the texts, (3) the practices readers use to understand the texts, and (4) "the social roles" the texts and practices establish (146). This expansion of the idea of genre beyond text and into actions, processes, and relationships brings us back to genres as *messy* and *complex*. It is difficult to define genres precisely; from a synthesis of theorists' perspectives we can, however, characterize genres as

- social
- rhetorical
- dynamic
- historical
- cultural
- situated
- ideological

I will discuss each aspect of genre separately, but it will soon be clear that these aspects of genre are not discrete. They depend on each other and interrelate in complex ways.

### Social

Genres are social. They are used to act in specific situations, and they arise from social interactions. Because of those characteristics, they both reflect the social interaction and help people make sense of shared social experiences. As Bawarshi points out, they "help us define and organize kinds of social actions" ("Genre Function" 335). We make our way in social situations, and figure them out, partly through the genres associated with those situations. Programs at the opera and memos at the office guide participants in different situations. At the same time, the social situation shapes the genre. In some offices, less formal email messages replace memos, while in others, the email message still reads and looks like a traditional memo. So, genres act in situations, but they are also products of that situation.

Genres also respond to social situations; they interact with them. In fact, Bazerman asserts that "each successful text creates for its readers a social fact," becoming "part of the way that humans give shape to social activity" ("Speech Acts," 311, 317). Because of these shaping aspects, genres act as a kind of etiquette, according to Anne Freedman, showing

"how people get on with one another" ("Anyone" in Freedman and Medway 57); they are "a social code of behavior established between the reader and author" according to Bawarshi ("Genre Function" 343). Freedman suggests we consider the "rules" of genres to be manners more than laws; by doing so, we can see how genres not only act for purposes but also create options for our actions, options we can choose to adopt or reject, with corresponding social consequences. If we choose to submit a poem when a résumé is expected, we might not get the position—that is, of course, unless the position is for a poet. So genres are social in how they function and in how they respond, in their effects and in their origins.

Because genres are social, part of the meaning they carry resides in the social context that creates the genre. As Bazerman and Prior assert, "only part of the meaning resides in the particular qualities of the texts, while much sits within the sociohistorical genesis of the social, institutional, and material systems within which the texts, users, and interactions are bound together" ("Participating" 137). For example, they list multiple purposes for filling out a form: to "make application, comply with a regulation, or report an event" (144). The texts (forms) may seem similar, but the meaning each carries differs depending on the social situation in which it occurs. And, as people use a genre in a particular activity, they begin to see it as part of that activity, as part of the social web of the community.

Genres are not only ways users act socially. They also have a social aspect in themselves: they interact with each other, both explicitly and implicitly, in noticeable forms and in less noticeable uses of language (Bazerman, "Intertextuality" 86–87). These interactions are referred to as ~~intertextuality~~ and they occur in a number of ways. Some genres develop out of others, carrying elements of those previous genres into new situations; some respond to ideas and language in other genres, using that language or those ideas as support or as the basis for argument. One specific type of intertextuality, called "genre chains" by Christine M. Tardy and John M. Swales (570), describes genres that always act in response to prior genres. An assignment prompt from a teacher followed by the students' completed assignment followed by the teacher's comments and grade on the assignment—that would be a genre chain.

As a result of this (or interwoven with this) social-activity building aspect, genres position participants, creating social roles for them. David Quammen addresses this role assignment when he writes about compiling his magazine columns for a book: "I mention that sense of relationship because a column is, in my opinion, different from other sorts

Genre Chains  
Intertextuality

chains

of magazine writing. Part of a columnist's special task is to turn oneself into an agreeable habit, yet to maintain an edge of surprise and challenge that prevents readers from letting the habit become somnolent rote. . . . The relationship between a magazine writer and the readers tends, in most circumstances, to be fleeting and shallow. In a book, on the other hand, a reader undertakes a sustained and serious connection with the writer. . . . A column can be the most conversational form of journalism, but to create the sense of a conversation with readers, the writer must consent to be a person, not a pundit" (11–12). As Quammen demonstrates, different genres create different relationships. To make any relationship work, the participants agree to take on certain roles. As Paré and Smart explain, "these generic characteristics of role and relationship determine what can and cannot be done and said by particular individuals, as well as when, how, where, and to whom" (149). When I receive an email message from my supervisor, I take a different stance (word choice, level of formality in tone, etc.) in my response than I do when I reply to an email message from a student. Same genre—different roles. The assignment and acceptance of roles and the resulting relationships are part of the social aspect of genres.

## Rhetorical

Because they both establish and enforce relationships, genres are rhetorical. That is, they allow users to choose among options to effectively accomplish their purposes in each particular situation. Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors identify the "choice of available resources to achieve an end" as part of what makes something rhetorical (2). Certainly, if genres are viewed as manners, choice is an element, as is adapting to situation: manners shift for different situations, and people can choose to observe expectations or not. Genre users, then, consider options for communicating their own purposes within the situation, choosing to follow generic expectations or not, to one degree or another.

Devitt posits the presence of both stability and flexibility in the nature of any genre: "stability to ensure that the genre continues to fulfill its necessary functions, flexibility to ensure that individuals can adapt the genre to their particular situations and their changing circumstances" (*Writing* 135). The flexibility she mentions and users' ability to adapt genres show their rhetorical aspects. Terence T. Pang describes these rhetorical choices as moves: "Moves are purposeful functional units sustaining the communicative intent of the speaker" (147). Genre users can choose among obligatory moves—those aspects of a genre that are es-

stability + flexibility  
in tandem.

sential to others' identification of it as a genre—and optional moves—those aspects of a genre that are more flexible. For example, in a movie review it would be obligatory to include the reviewer's overall evaluation of the movie, examples to support that evaluation, and references to the acting, cinematography, or other aspects of the production. Optional moves might include choices regarding the arrangement of the review's content (giving the evaluation first or last), the tone the reviewer takes (objective or satiric), or the overall purpose (to inform or persuade). Deciding to follow expected moves and selecting among optional ones are rhetorical choices. The element of strategic choice, of being able to consider situation, purpose, timing, audience, culture, and available options when using a genre, is what makes genres rhetorical.

### Dynamic

Partly because they are both social and rhetorical, genres change, and they create change in their contexts. Jeanne Fahnestock provides an interesting example that shows how genres affect context. She lists three different approaches a dean can take to address faculty about budget cuts: listing the cuts in a this-is-how-it-will-be format; explaining the needs and, together with the faculty, brainstorming possibilities for addressing the cuts; or explaining the problem and arguing for a particular course of action (266). Although the initial situation is the same, Fahnestock argues that each rhetorical choice will create a different resulting situation; thus, the choice of genre can change the situation: "The ability of genre to shape context is, then, an important point" (266). This ability of genres to both respond to and affect situation is part of what makes them dynamic.

Another aspect of genres, their ability to be flexible, also contributes to their dynamic nature: because genres can adapt, they also change. Deborah Hicks notes that genres "do not fully *determine* the particular rhetorical moves that can occur in a given setting. Participants can, and do, interpret and subtly alter the discourses that might otherwise be constitutive of a social action" (467). Echoing this sentiment about genres' flexibility, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin assert this interesting claim: "We feel that genericness is not an all-or-nothing proposition. . . . Instead, communicators engage in (and their texts reveal) various degrees of *generic activity*" ("Rethinking" 492). In other words, some examples of a genre might be more like the expectation than others. Because users adapt genres to their purposes and make rhetorical choices in varying social situations, genres have flexibility—and flexibility can lead, eventually, to change.

Researchers reviewing specific genres through time have documented this dynamic nature. For example, Devitt summarizes JoAnne Yates's review of American business genres from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an example—noting the factors influencing genre change as well as the ways genres influence cultural transformations (*Writing* 93–96, 102–6, 110–12). In her survey of several such studies, Devitt demonstrates that contextual factors as well as individuals working within genres (resisting them as well as adapting them) contribute to genre change. Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi assert that this dynamic aspect of genres is very much a factor of people's use of them: "Genres do not change magically on their own; people change genres, usually slowly and imperceptibly, as they begin to recognize the ways in which genres no longer fully serve their needs" (163). Such change can take place at different paces because of varying influences, but there is no doubt that people using genres to accomplish social and personal goals will have an effect on the genres they use.

## Historical

Genres are historical in the sense that when they change—or when new genres develop—they depend on previous genres, antecedent genres, for their development. In explaining this characteristic in oral language, M. M. Bakhtin declared, "Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances" (69). Echoing Bakhtin, Margaret Himley asserts that "in learning to write (or speak), the learner . . . learns the ways of making meaning of a particular language community by appropriating and reworking those ways to which she has access" (138). Because genres don't exist in a vacuum, because, as Devitt affirms, "our response to [a] situation can be guided by past responses," antecedent genres reveal the historical aspect of genres ("Generalizing" 576). In fact, Devitt argues that "when new genres develop abruptly they may derive more from the context of genres [i.e., previous related ones] than from the context of situation" (*Writing* 99).

Kathleen Jamieson's study of George Washington's first State of the Union address shows the incredible influence of prior genres in developing new ones:

The umbilical ties were stronger than the framers of the Constitution suspected. Faced with an unprecedented rhetorical situation, Washington responded to the Constitutional enjoinder that the president from time to time report to Congress on the state of the union and recommend necessary and expedient legislation, by

Context of genres  
Context of situation



delivering a speech rooted in the monarch's speech from the throne. The Congress, which had rejected as too monarchical the title "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of the Rights of the Same," promptly reacted as Parliament traditionally reacted to the King, and drafted, debated, and delivered an "echoing speech" in reply. (411)

As Devitt concludes, when no genre exists for a new action, the "situation depends heavily on the first rhetor to choose antecedents wisely" (*Writing* 97). Certainly when the first choice isn't as appropriate as it could be, it will be changed—eventually. Until then, though, the consequences of the ineffective genre are at work in the situation. Because genres grow out of past genres and develop into new ones, because they may even depend more deeply on those past genres than we expect, they are historical.

### Cultural

In a socially based theory of writing, context matters. Genres are cultural in the sense that they occur in and respond to what Devitt calls a "macro level of context"—a context broader than the immediate situation of the genre—or culture (*Writing* 31). Other theorists refer to this larger concept of context as *discourse community*, *activity system*, *community*, or simply *context*. All of these other terms have aspects unique to them but share the idea of broad context, which I generalize here with the label of culture. My generalization, however, isn't intended to simplify the concept of culture. Miller, noting that "Raymond Williams (1976) has called 'culture' one of the two or three 'most complicated' words in the English language," defines it this way: "culture as a 'particular way of life' of a time and place, in all its complexity, experienced by a group that understands itself as an identifiable group" ("Rhetorical" 68). Devitt adds specifics when she defines culture ("loosely") as "a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and templates" (*Writing* 25). So culture represents the broad context that influences genres—what genres are used, when and how, and by whom.

Despite these clarifications, the concept of culture—discourse community, context, whatever—is, as Berkenkotter and Huckin call it, "slippery" because it isn't a "static entity" ("Rethinking" 497). People move in and out of cultures and belong to several simultaneously. Devitt also acknowledges that people also form groups with commonalities within cultures and between cultures. She delineates three kinds of such groups: communities, which are "people who share substantial amounts of time together in common endeavors"; collectives, which are "people who gather

3 kinds  
of groups

around a single repeated interest, without the frequency or intensity of contact of a community"; and social networks, which are "people who are connected once—or more—removed, through having common contact with another person or organization" (*Writing* 63). These different degrees of interaction among people in various types of relationships exemplify the difficulty in pinning down culture or context.

In addition, genres span communities, enabling relationships between and among them, and genres that develop within a community are sometimes meant for use by those outside it. So the relationships between genres and culture are varied and complex. Miller approaches the complexity in this way: "Rather than seeing [community] as comfortable and homogeneous and unified, I want to characterize it as fundamentally heterogeneous and contentious" ("Rhetorical" 74). Within this disunity, though, she sees genres as a stabilizing aspect: "In their *pragmatic* dimension, genres not only help people in spatio-temporal communities do their work and carry out their purposes; they also help virtual communities, the relationships we carry around in our heads; to reproduce and reconstruct themselves, to continue their stories" (75). So, genres can provide cohesiveness to a culture, but culture also has a role in "defin[ing] what situations and genres are possible or likely" (Devitt, *Writing* 25). Echoing Devitt, Coe indicates that genres define cultures as much as cultures define genres: "part of what defines a discourse community is the genre system it sanctions and empowers" ("New Rhetoric" 199). Indeed, he returns to the reciprocity of culture and genre by pointing out that using a genre "usually means . . . invoking and/or reconstructing both the community's values and its view of the rhetorical situation" (199). Thus, culture influences genres and is, as a result, also influenced by the genres employed by participants in the culture.

Complexity  
of  
communities

### Situated

Genres are also *situated* in smaller contexts; that is, they are located in or placed in relation to more particular aspects of their surroundings. Using Devitt's term, the context of situation refers to the "micro level" of context (*Writing* 31). Such a context differs slightly from traditional views of the rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, occasion) by adding social aspects such as participant roles and the relation of the recurring situation to purpose and to uses of language (Devitt, *Writing* 16). To clarify how situation is inherent to genre, Randy Bomer gives an example of seeing a piece of paper under his windshield wiper; it could be either a parking ticket or a flyer advertising something. Depending on the situa-

tion, he can anticipate which is most likely. When he's handed a paper by an usher in a Broadway theater, it is probably a program: "Even before we look at it, we have oriented ourselves to ways of reading that genre and will read it only with those questions in mind that are usually answered by a playbill. ~~Every piece of writing, every text we read, comes to us as both a text—the piece it is—and a kind of text—an instance of a genre~~" (117). Situation positions us to both receive and act with genres—and creates roles and relationships as we do so.

Like culture, situation is also reciprocal, as Devitt explains: "Genre and situation are tightly interwoven . . . but it is genre that determines situation as well as situation that determines genre. To say that genre responds to situation not only is deterministic but also oversimplifies their reciprocal relationship" (*Writing* 23). Devitt illustrates this situatedness when she explains that students writing letters to the editor for a class assignment will perform a different genre than a concerned citizen writing a letter to the editor would (22). The situations—the immediate, and particularly social, aspects of context such as purpose, participant roles, and exigencies, at least—differ, so the genre, as a consequence, does also.

### Ideological

Because genres are social, cultural, and situated, it should be no surprise that they are also ideological, that they represent ways of thinking about and valuing the world. Berkenkotter and Huckin note that "genres signal a discourse community's norms" ("Rethinking" 497), and Devitt explains how: "Because people in groups develop genres, genres reflect what the group believes and how it views the world" (*Writing* 59). Since genres are not just forms of social interaction but also ways of being, participating in genres involves assuming the ways of thinking that encompass those ways of being. Bazerman says that acting with genres causes participants to "take on the mood, attitude, and actional possibilities. . . . Adopt a frame of mind, set your hopes, plan accordingly, and begin acting" ("Genre" 13). He likens using genres to going to a place and taking on the character of the place: "If you hang around the race track long enough, you become one of those race track characters" (14).

Since genres are shaped by situation, they represent the values of participants in that situation. When users of genres come from a situation removed from that which created the genre, values may clash. Paré describes Inuit social workers being urged to more closely imitate the record-keeping conventions developed by their urban counterparts. The

Value  
clash

ideologies of those detached, detailed records represented the values of the urban culture, not the close, almost familial, relationships of the Inuit culture, and this created a conflict for workers: "The workers' dilemma indicates how participation in workplace genres situates writers in relations of power" (63). The use of these genres divided the "individual's sense of identity" (66). In situations like this one with the Inuit workers, James Paul Gee suggests that users may suffer from the "extra-cognitive work" that occurs because of conflicts between the ideologies of the genres being used and the personal ideologies of the users (158). These consequences to the ideologies of genres are not all bad, however, sometimes opening new ways of viewing the world might be beneficial. Devitt claims that "ideological power is not necessarily good or evil but rather   
 ✧ ... ambivalent: it works for both good and bad" (*Writing* 158). But these consequences—whether they're perceived to be good or bad—do serve to illustrate that teaching and acting with genres carry social and political implications because of genres' ideological aspects.

dec + consequences  
to the ideologies  
of genres

Because of ideology, what genres get taught in school and to whom, and whether they are taught as a matter of compliance or resistance, are all matters of concern. Peter Clements asserts that "teachers are never just instructing writers in the means and methods for realizing their thoughts more effectively on paper, but rather are coercing students into specific political choices about how to align themselves within various discourses" (203). Certainly teachers need to be aware of the ideologies of the genres they teach—and avoid what Tom Romano calls "a genre rut" when students become "Johnny-One-Genres" ("*Teaching*" 174). Journals represent an ideology as much as five-paragraph essays do. Romano urges teachers to "examine our courses and school curricula for genre hegemony. Does one genre dominate?" (174). If it does, what ideologies are we reinforcing for students? What ones are we ignoring?

Coercing students  
into specific political  
choices.

As a result of these political/ideological aspects, some theorists urge that a critique of genres is essential to students' adequate understanding of them. After explaining that rules control but resources enable, Lemke argues that "to teach genres without critique is not only unethical, it is intellectually faulty. The critique of a genre is what makes it into a resource. It is only when we understand the origins, history, and social functions of a genre, i.e. its politics, that we are empowered to make intelligent, informed decisions in our own interest about how we shall use it or change it" (5). However, teaching students to resist the ideologies of genres can be difficult: when they use a genre, even in imitation in classroom settings, they are acting somewhat according to the ideology inherent in that genre. Heather Marie Bastian argues that "when we

Yes!

Genres  
Creating  
subjects  
of  
subject  
varieties

When we

perform genres, we are positioned not only as situation-specific genre subjects but also [as] an overarching generic subject. And both of these positionings work to create complacent subjects" (7). By performing genres, then, students may not later be able to resist the ideologies of those genres.

As we can see, these are the characteristics of genre: social, rhetorical, dynamic, historical, cultural, situated, and ideological. Different theories about genre place varying degrees of emphasis on these characteristics, and doing this results in different views of what it means to use or learn a genre. Those differences are the foundation for and the results of the range of genre theories.

## GENRE THEORIES

Traditional genre theory, as explained earlier, deals with customary definitions of genre: literary, form-focused, and fixed. More recent rhetorical genre theory focuses on (1) everyday, workplace, or school texts; (2) situation and context as they relate to textual regularities; (3) the dynamic, fluid nature of genres; (4) the blurring of boundaries; and (5) the ways genres develop from other genres. In contrast to traditional genre theory, this contemporary notion of genre theory recognizes genres as ideological and conceptual rather than neutral and concrete. Freedman and Medway also observe that contemporary genre theory is "descriptive, rather than prescriptive" ("Introduction" 3).

Within this broad generalization of contemporary genre theory, though, are a range of theories that differ on the various implications of genre concepts. Some of this difference has to do with place: theories that developed out of the Australian linguistic foundation have different concerns and theoretical origins than do those that developed out of the North American foundation. As Coe notes, "genre theories vary significantly" because they "are themselves motivated and situated" ("New Rhetoric" 198). In Australia, concerns with helping marginalized groups gain access to the social and economic mainstream were addressed by linguists looking for application of their ideas in schools. Widespread dissatisfaction with the more expressivist aspects of the writing process movement there influenced an approach to genre that emphasized practical aspects, including form. In contrast, in the United States, where the writing process movement had very strong support, rhetoricians' interests in the social aspects of writing were more theoretical than practical. So although similar issues were at play in both regions, those stressed in Australia were not as vital in the United States. As a result, the differing

Concrete		Abstract
Genre as ... Text	Rhetoric	Practice

Figure 1. The Genre Theory Continuum

needs and input created different tangents for the direction of genre theory. What eventually developed among theorists across the world was a range of ideas for what genre theory really is: genre theories—plural.

→ genre theories

Bazerman and Prior summarize the range of genre theories in this way: "Genre has been explored in recent decades from three quite different perspectives: as text, as rhetoric, and as practice" ("Participating" 138). As I interpret their summary, we could look at these different theoretical perspectives along a continuum, with *genre as text* as the most concrete theory and *genre as practice* as the most abstract. Theorists with these various perspectives emphasize different elements of common aspects of theory (Figure 1).

### Genre as Text - formalist perspective, most common in classrooms

Genre theories at one end of the continuum, *genre as text*, tend toward a formalist perspective. Although theorists look at the ways the features of the form reflect the social situation, they generally begin with the form. Thus, from this perspective, résumés put important information in prominent positions grouped under common headings—education, experience, references—and in noticeable styles because the audience is usually a busy professional looking quickly through a number of documents. Despite an understanding of the relationship between context and text, though, there is a tendency for those with this perspective to emphasize form more than situation.

This theoretical position, *genre as text*, depends on a somewhat traditional concept of genre—stable, though still responsive to context—since this point of view "rest[s] not on what a genre is . . . but on how genres are textually realized" (Bazerman and Prior, "Participating" 138). Instruction in genres often stems from this theoretical position. Because instructional plans in classrooms remove most genres from actual contexts and must rely on the stability of genres for teaching, forms are an obvious *what's left*: A major goal for many in the *genre as text* group is to help marginalized groups find ways into the roles of power: if a person

Goal

can't write a business letter, how likely is that person to get a job that will allow her to move into circles of influence? This goal explains a pedagogical inclination toward focusing on textual features: students would need fairly stable models and instruction in formal features to help them learn the genres.

However, Freedman and Medway note that providing equal access isn't as simple as teaching the forms of genres: "Students from nondominant positions cannot become powerful by simply adopting the genres of power, since the latter embody values and assumptions opposed to those held by people outside the centres of power" ("Introduction" 15). Students have to act and be what the genres represent, not just copy the forms, to assume an insider position. And even if all it took to become part of the powerful was to adopt the forms of that culture, Kress stresses another problem with this theoretical position: "The emphasis on access to the genres of power would lead to a spurious kind of equity, in which there was no challenge to the existing status quo of social arrangements" ("Genre and the Changing Contexts" 464). In other words, students might be able to join the community but might never be aware of the ideological implications of that association. Also, the genre as text perspective may diminish students' understanding of the dynamic aspect of genre and fail to acknowledge genres' full complexity. Too much focus on form might suggest that genres are formulaic and might not provide students with a sense that users have options that can reflect situations and individual needs within those situations.

A needed  
positioning

Danger

Limitations

### Genre as Rhetoric = genres are ways of acting

Theorists in the more central position, *genre as rhetoric*, emphasize the social actions that give rise to a genre. Because certain situations have developed forms for acting in those situations, for these theorists, genres are ways of acting: "Writing is not only a skill; it is also a way of being and acting in the world at a particular time, in a particular situation, for the achievement of particular desires" (Bawarshi, *Genre* 156). As Bazerman and Prior explain it, this theoretical position "stays focused on textual features, but reads those features as parts of a sociorhetorical situation" ("Participating" 138). Visible textual features are seen as perspectives *into* a situation, not as ends in themselves. These theorists might begin with the text but move into a consideration of the ways the texts they explore both respond to situations and allow for variety and change in those situations. If forms arise from context, using those forms as a way to look back at the context seems logical, as Joseph M. Williams and

Gregory G. Colomb assert: "When we learn social context, we are also learning its forms; but when we learn forms, we may also be learning their social contexts" (262). From this perspective, writing isn't only, or even primarily, about the text anymore; it's also about the situation surrounding the writing, about understanding that situation, and about ensuring that the rhetorical choices made in using a genre are effective for the situation and the user.

situational context

Devitt notes limitations to this perspective, though: "Interpreting discourse features thus requires not only situational but also cultural astuteness. . . . It is difficult for those who have not acted through the genres to recognize the full meaning and significance of textual features" (*Writing* 53). Thus, when texts are considered in relation to context, all the values and ideologies inherent in the culture and situation might not be visible to outsiders who look at the text alone.

limitations

### Genre as Practice *genres as actions*

The third perspective, *genre as practice*, begins "with the process of making genres" rather than with the genres themselves (Bazerman and Prior, "Participating" 139). Theorists in this range see "textual practices as fundamental to generic action" and emphasize the "dynamic, fluid, heterogeneous, and situated" aspects of genres (138). These theorists focus more on the contexts and processes related to genre *use* than on the genres themselves, or they see genres as actions, ways of being, rather than texts. Because those with this perspective emphasize the dynamic aspect of genres—their "fragility, plasticity, and heterogeneity" (139)—as central to genre theory, they are more likely to try to describe genre change in a particular setting and focus on the instability of genres than they are to look at a text as an artifact that would provide a lens into a situation or as a text that would represent a situation, as the other two perspectives do.

apt to.

Theorists with this perspective rarely promote a pedagogical application of theory because "learning genres involves learning to act—with other people, artifacts, and environments, all of which are themselves in ongoing processes of change and development" (Bazerman and Prior, "Participating" 147). For these theorists, the focus is on the characteristics of genre interaction, on ways of creating meaning, on the actions genres enable. Not only can a genre be a way of making a text and a way of acting in a certain situation but it can also be a way to make sense of a situation, a way to view the world. Thus, this theoretical position emphasizes ideologies and perspectives, actions rather than texts.

focus



## THEORIES IN PRACTICE

Does it matter that theorists can't come to a single, unified theory about genres? Not really. In fact, our thinking and practice can be richer for this diversity of thought. What does matter is our understanding of how these various theories of genre play out in practice, of their possibilities and potential for student learning. The nature of the differences in theory results in very divergent views on what theory should look like in classrooms. *Mindful* teachers, to adapt Richard Fulkerson's use of Charles Silberman's term, know what theory is represented in their pedagogy.

The initial model proposed for instruction from the genre as text perspective established a three-part pattern: (1) examination of a model text, (2) followed by group imitation of the text, (3) leading to individual imitation of the text. The model was critiqued as too focused on form and on academic genres, thus stifling creativity and personal expression. This criticism came despite the assertion by J. R. Martin, Frances Christie, and Joan Rothery (the model's authors) years earlier that "it is very important to recognize that genres make meaning: they are not simply a set of formal structures into which meanings are poured" (64). In response to the criticism and as a result of dialogue among educators, the model was revised.

J. R. Martin's revised model presents a more contextualized interpretation of genre (128). It begins with students investigating the social context of a genre before they examine the genre (text) itself. To have students move away from seeing texts simply as forms, guiding questions for examining the text relate to functions and relationships, not only to formal features. After students practice independent construction of texts, they are encouraged to reflect on (and critique) the genre, questioning the ideas and relationships the genre privileges. The revised model, then, moves toward a more theoretically rich understanding of genre by having students investigate context *before* looking at sample texts and critique the genre *after* creating their own imitations.

The interest in equity exhibited by those who favor this theoretical position is admirable; the potential for focus on text forms, sometimes to the point of formulas, is less representative of genre theory than some theorists like. Given the first try at making this model work in classrooms and how formulaic it became, critics feel that the revised approach may still endorse a tendency, in some teachers' hands, to diminish the idea of genre until it's almost a fill-in-the-blank concept, especially if there is limited variety in the examples of the studied genre and a focus on replicating one example. However, when Julie E. Wollman-Bonilla observed teachers following a process similar to this model, she noted that the

Genres  
Create meaning

Revised approach

1. Students  
Begin

2. Then

Revised  
approach  
in practice

teachers "did not explicitly discuss grammatical choices" but rather modeled the grammatical and structural *options* in interactive writing with the students, thus moving away from teaching genres as formulas (41). Therefore, it seems that an approach based on genre as text may be highly dependent on each individual teacher's use of the instructional model and her understanding of theory as it informs practice.

The genre as rhetoric group looks at texts as responses to situations and thereby links the two aspects of genre theory that are most consistent among the different approaches—text and context. The method of instruction is less patterned than the genre as text's plan, but it generally involves examining a specific context, the people involved in that context, and the texts they use. Students analyze a variety of sample texts and ask questions about the noticeable features, not primarily to identify the features but more to determine how those features both reflect and respond to the situations the genres come from and to evaluate how effective the rhetorical choices might be in a particular situation. As Coe notes, this perspective of genre alters some basic conceptions about the teaching of writing; at the very least, he says, it should encourage writers to "recognize that different writing situations require different types of writing, that what is good in a piece of academic literary criticism may not be good in a newspaper book review and will very likely not be good in a brochure" ("New Rhetoric" 200). It should help students see how writing derives from and responds to situations that require action.

In some cases of practice from this theoretical perspective, students replicate the genres; in others the investigation of the relationship between text and context is the sole purpose of the questioning. Some theorists worry that this approach still focuses too much on the text, not allowing enough room for the change and variation that is part of genre theory, especially if the samples students investigate are too limited in number or too similar to each other. Other theorists wonder if it's really possible to see the whole situation from outside the context, just by looking at the text. They believe this method of exploration would provide a somewhat superficial sense of the situation and therefore a somewhat limited ability to determine rhetorical effectiveness.

The genre as practice group focuses most on the context and the dynamic nature of genres, to the point that some adherents assert that genres are impossible to teach in a classroom. Instead, proponents take an approach similar to Gee's applications of learned versus acquired literacy, in which he states that "someone cannot engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner. You are either in-it or you're not. Discourses are connected with displays of an identity" (155). Applying this

perspective to writing and writing instruction, Sidney I. Dobrin explains: "The systems by which we interpret are not codifiable in any logical manner since discourse does not operate in any logico-systemic manner and never remains static long enough to develop concrete understandings of the communicative interaction. In other words, there are no codifiable processes by which we can characterize, identify, solidify, grasp discourse, and, hence, there is no way to teach discourse, discourse interpretation, or discourse disruption" (132-33).

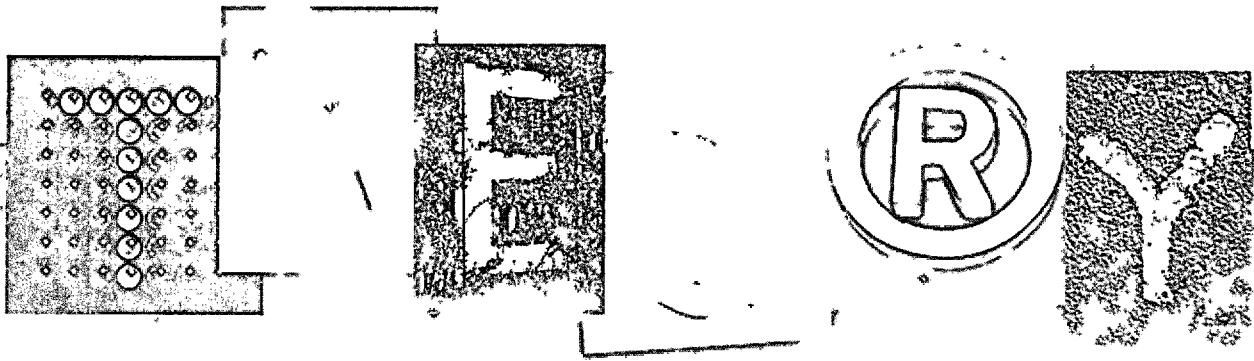
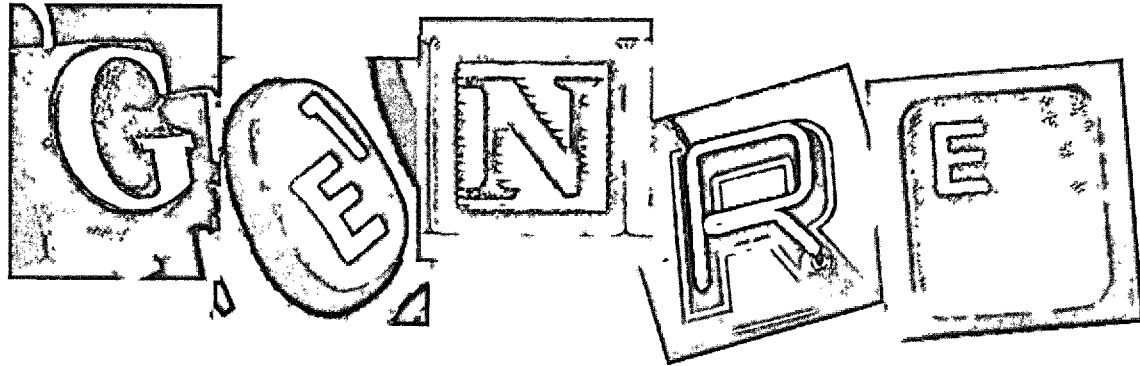
No way  
to  
teach

Theorists from other theoretical positions (genre as text and genre as rhetoric) might question the value of the theory if it can't have an impact in educating students in writing and reading, although Dobrin defends that, too: "Classroom application need not always be the measure for value of theory" (133). Still, teachers might wonder how to prepare students for writing outside of school if there is no way to replicate situational contexts in classes and therefore no way to teach about genres until students encounter them on their own. Some theorists at this end of the continuum recommend, instead, teaching awareness of genres "to inculcate *receptive* skills . . . turn[ing] away from developing rhetorical skills and toward development of rhetorical sensibilities" (Petraglia 62). Thus, teachers with this perspective might be more likely to teach about context than about texts. Those with other theoretical perspectives and social agendas might find such an approach an evasion of the hard work of teaching writing as well as a route to reduced opportunities for equity.

In a very general way, this is an overview of contemporary genre theory and its uses in the classroom. Like the tip of an iceberg, there is more complexity and detail to the theory than is presented here. A passage in Devitt's book hints at the depth of thinking that has occurred, is occurring, and will occur related to genre theory: "Many areas of genre theory still need further research and exploration. For example, not all genres allow a simple matchup with a particular set of contexts; some might interact with multiple contexts. Not all contexts that people define as recurring produce recognized genres, and some may produce more than one genre. People may, of course, mix genres and mix contexts, and they may use genres badly. Genres may be unsuccessful, fail, or die out. Genre is too rich a subject to be mined completely in just one volume" (*Writing* 31). With these words, Devitt acknowledges some of the questions still to be addressed by theorists. In the appendixes, I address some additional questions and issues related to genre theory. In an effort to address some of the concerns Devitt mentions, I also explain a little more about some of the new directions in which genre theory is moving.

TRIP

Theory & Research Into Practice



TEACHING, WRITING, AND BEING

DEBORAH DEAN

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