



Introducing Genre

1A Hearing Voices

The seven passages below are in English. The observation that they are all written in English may be less important than the grounds on which they differ. As you read them, think about what they have in common and how they differ from one another. Issuing from decidedly different moments in North American life, each passage voices a different **cultural situation**. No one could say which of these passages is “best,” or which is proper English and which is not. But we can think about how each voice—each style of expression—serves the **situation** from which it arises.

PASSAGE 1

Research on stigma management strategies has examined the many ways that discredited persons, or those of low status, attempt to maintain self-worth and dignity (see Anderson and Snow 2001 for a review). In *Stigma*, Goffman outlined “passing,” in which the discreditable person conceals the stigma through “information control,” and “covering,” which involves making “a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large” (1963a:102). Numerous studies have enhanced the understanding of the processes of passing and covering (e.g., Charmaz 1991, 1995; Herman 1993; Anderson, Snow, and Cress 1994; Nack 2008). When neither strategy is possible, especially when one has reached one’s limits, defiant behavior

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becomes an option, and the stigmatized engage in “reactive, entailing actions and verbalizations meant to reject humiliating moral assaults or ridicule” (Anderson et al. 1994:134).

Irvine, Kahl, and Smith 2012: 25.

PASSAGE 2

CanuckDriver

2:33 PM on 15 July 2013

Trust the G&M to keep flogging this dead horse. There has been no—repeat—NO—global warming since 1998. There has been a slight cooling trend.

A major recent study shows a direct correlation to CFC’s in the Earth’s atmosphere interacting with solar radiation as the cause. CFC concentrations are declining and with their decline so are temperatures.

Besides, only ice on land need be considered when talking about melting ice caps. If it’s in the water already, it does not affect the levels. Don’t believe me, take a glass of water and put an ice cube in it. Mark the water level. Wait for the ice to melt, then check the level.

More of the IPCC’s utter balderdash.

8 replies

PASSAGE 3

My name is Jersey and I am only 15 weeks old. My mom is Amy and she is just 1 year old. My mom and I are best buds and are always found together! Why won’t people adopt us together? Please don’t make us be adopted separately, we want to stay together!! Come meet us and you’ll see! We are both awesome and you’ll have endless entertainment ... mom sometimes likes to talk so maybe she’ll tell you a story? We are currently hangin with VOKRA so please go to the site and fill out an adoption application if you are interested in us....

PASSAGE 4

In baseball, the home run is a sure way to score and the problem of hitting the ball as far as possible is as old as the game. An analysis of the problem consists of two phases: impact and flight. Many previous

investigations have considered one or both of the phases of this problem. Briggs¹ investigated the effects of velocity and spin on the lateral deflection of a curve ball. Baseballs spinning about a vertical axis were dropped through a horizontal wind tunnel. The lateral deflection of the ball was found to be proportional to the spin and the square of the translational velocity for speeds up to 150 ft/s and spins up to 1800 rpm. Achenbach² characterized the drag on spheres as a function of the Reynolds number Re and the surface roughness. He showed that there is a critical Reynolds number at which the drag coefficient C_D decreases dramatically and that this critical Reynolds number decreases as the roughness increases. Although a baseball is not uniformly rough, the spinning seams cause boundary layer behavior similar to that of a rough surface.

Sawicki and Hubbard 2003: 1152.

PASSAGE 5

Executive living in this LIKE NEW, upgraded, spacious 1 bdrm & den (could be 2nd bdrm), 2 full baths home in a boutique complex. Absolutely fantastic water & mountain views. Just steps to the seawall, marina, parks, restaurants and shopping. Featuring stunning Brazilian tiger wood H/W flrs, upgraded doors, mouldings & baseboards. Upgraded appliances incl 5-Star gas range, Fisher & Pakel fridge, Asko top of the line dishwasher & Panasonic Genius microwave, Caesar Stone counters & breakfast bar with California glass tile backsplash. Bathrms with travertine floors & walls, granite accents & counters, Kohler sinks & Grohe trims. Plush carpet, custom lighting built-in custom storage & closet. \$879,000.

PASSAGE 6

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PASSAGE 7

“Memories give me the strength I need to proceed, the strength I need to believe.” Puff Daddy. This babygirl faced many challenges & brings with her wisdom, strength & sweet memories. Much luv to God & her loving parents. FM’s: B&E’s, YB ’95–97 crew, Vox/R#17, fireworks, 290 guy (Minty? Sarah?), car races (boom!) eject’n seat/ Chungism w/Mike, killing 007/starfish w/Ho, who’s Paul?, Summer Jam, jon z’s w/evil one & STM grad/ 101 w/Brian. Shouts: my girl 2107 (&pops), Jenn, Geoff, Ang, Bear (you’re mine! 112 hugs), all my buddies & bad boyz [sic]! FP: skydive, be happy & live the good life!

Exercise 1

Name the types of writing exemplified in Passages 1–7. Can you identify the distinct occasion or cultural situation which each serves? A cultural situation connects writers and intended readers, so begin by trying to identify the writer and reader for each passage. How does this situation shape the writer’s choices?

1B Hearing Genres

The passages above not only serve the cultural situations in which they arise; they also embody them. They represent distinct occasions in our culture; at the same time, people recognize and respond to them in ways that can be recognized as typical. So, when we hear these different voices, we also “hear” the setting in which they operate. The sounds of these passages indicate typical moments which culture has produced: occasions of professional publication, online debate, or legal agreement. In each case, the situation has left its mark on, or *imprinted*, English. It has pressed into the general shape of the language features—for example, patterns of word choice and sentence construction—which mark it for use in particular contexts. The **imprint** makes language characteristic: something we recognize as typical of how people communicate with one another in particular circumstances.

To name the types and situations for each of these passages, you have to call upon your knowledge of North American culture. Perhaps Passage 3 escaped you: your life experience may not have included contact with the situation which has produced this particular kind of pet-adoption

advertisement. Or, you may never have encountered highly condensed yearbook profiles of the kind that appears in Passage 7. Hearing and speaking, reading and writing, we enact our experience of the world as that experience has been shaped by culture.

As the diversity of the seven passages shows, language is sensitive to situation. Moreover, the way we use language changes as new situations arise. For example, new technologies have given rise to new situations and new ways of using language, such as texting. In this situation, instead of using conventional spelling and full sentences, we often use single letters, numbers, and emoticons; and our friends recognize this way of writing as a typical and appropriate, not incorrect, use of English. In recent years, this sensitivity to situation has been captured and studied in new ways of thinking about **genre**. This book takes advantage of these recent developments.

Before sketching new ideas about genre, let us glance at old ones. Chances are that when you hear the word “genre,” you think of music or movies. For example, you may think of the difference between hip hop and technopop, or between slasher movies and psychological thrillers. Or you heard the word in the high-school classroom in connection with literary studies. Genre was, for instance, a way of saying that poems, novels, and plays are different. So the notion of genre helped school boards make their curriculum orderly. Now at university, some of your English courses may be organized according to genre: one course is about poems, another is about novels. For these purposes, genre has been a useful concept, tending toward traditional descriptions of literary form.

But then, at the end of the twentieth century, more and more scholars began to think about the social and political contexts of knowledge. Scholars considered the ways in which the characteristics of statements about the world depended on who was making the statement and who was being addressed. Alert to new opportunities, genre offered itself as a way of thinking about the context-dependency of language—the ways in which language depends upon and responds to the social and political contexts that produce it.

While old ideas of genre had slipped into regarding only **form**, the new ideas insisted that it was not form alone that constituted genre, but situation and form:

$$\text{situation} + \text{form} = \text{genre}$$

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Or, to put it another way, the situations that writers find themselves in *give rise* to genres.

This new understanding of genre gave researchers a way of talking about similarities of form not as rules but as signs of common ground among communities of readers and writers: shared attitudes, practices and habits, positions in the world. Forms of speaking are connected to social contexts where people *do* things—like renting an apartment or finding a pet. Different routines of social behaviour—habits of acting in the world—create different genres of speech and writing.

In this light, consider the thank-you note as a genre. People who know this genre not only know how to compose the note—what to mention, how much to say, how to begin, how to conclude, what kind of writing materials to use—but also *when* to do all this: soon after receipt of a certain type of gift from a person in a certain relation to the recipient. (So, in all probability, you would not send a thank-you note to your parents for the gift of a laptop computer or to the Students' Union for the daily planner you were handed as you walked across campus on the first day of classes. And if you delay sending a thank-you note where one is called for, you will feel—consciously or unconsciously—that you are failing to comply with the genre's norms, no matter how perfectly you compose the note itself.) The thank-you note genre is made up not only of a characteristic type of written expression but also of the situation in which it occurs. It is a way of acting in the world. People with know-how in this genre understand not only its form but also its situation. We could even say that, at some deep, perhaps unconscious level, these people also share an understanding of the role of the genre in larger social or cultural situations—systems of relationship amongst family and friends, symbolized by the exchange of gifts and expressions of recognition and gratitude.

Once scholars began to consider genre outside traditional literary studies, it became clear that English classes weren't its only, or even its best, place of work. Increasingly, other kinds of writing began to be thought of in terms of genre: auditors' reports, news accounts of violent crime, case reports in publications in veterinary medicine, architects' proposals, primary school show-and-tell sessions, and—most important to our interests—**academic writing**. At all these sites, genre was a means of investigating similarities in documents occurring in similar situations.

Genre theory gave researchers a way of talking about these similarities not as rules but as signs of common ground among communities of readers and writers: shared attitudes, practices and habits, positions in the world. So the style of Passage 5, the real estate ad, comes about not because somebody followed rules, but because it embodies a widely recognized situation—property transaction in a market economy—through its typical, list-like naming of qualities that the users of this genre recognize as valued and translatable into dollars. Views are good, and so is proximity to the city's seawall and marina. The document assumes that readers recognize the value of custom-built storage and the prestige associated with various brand names. It trusts that readers will interpret the wide array of materials—tiger wood, granite, travertine, and glass—as indicators of luxury and taste rather than as revealing a haphazard approach to construction. It also assumes that readers are familiar with the customary practice of buying and selling a dwelling—contacting a broker specializing in this kind of transaction. Note that such knowledge is not universal but cultural. In another culture, where people inherit their homes from their parents, or share them with co-workers, such a genre would not exist at all. Or some culture, somewhere, might value a home not for its brand name appliances but for its human history: while in urban North America people exchange homes with strangers, dwellings in some other place might be identified with their residents. Then the genre accompanying property transactions might develop techniques for describing the dwelling's current or past occupants in appealing or prestigious terms. In each case, the genre suits the cultural situation.

Perhaps, a hundred years from now, historians will examine personal ads or rental agreements to piece together vanished systems of association amongst people. Or they will look at the genres which report research in physics or social history to understand the systems of professional interaction and knowledge production which held academic communities together at the turn of the millennium.

Exercise 2

Consider one of the following pairs of popular genres, or come up with your own pair:

- the romantic comedy and the spy film;
- the half-hour infomercial and the brief television ad;
- manga and the American-style comic book;
- email and texting;
- hip hop and electronic dance music.

What are some differences in form between the two genres you've chosen? How do those differences embody the different social situations that those genres serve?

1C High-School vs. University Writing

Genre theory predicts that diversity of expression will reflect the complexities of social life, whether that life takes place in a chat room or on a hockey rink or in a university classroom. Because people interact for a lot of different purposes, they write and speak in a lot of different ways. And, as the world changes, so too will ways of writing and speaking. If we apply genre theory to the kinds of writing produced by university researchers, we can better understand what communities of scholars do and how they typically communicate with one another. For the student just beginning a university career, there are huge benefits to understanding how communities of scholars interact.

Writing *instruction*, however, has tended to focus on one type of writing: the schoolroom essay. Different kinds of assignments may produce different versions of the essay—the “argument” essay, for example, or the “expository” essay—but, generally, when students arrive at college or university, they are experienced in producing forms of writing which serve the high-school classroom. Along with this experience, they absorb—from teachers, from handbooks, from public sentiments—ideas about writing. It should be “clear” and “concise,” for example; it should not be “vague” or “wordy.” Writing should also be “logical” and “well organized.”

But then, at university, students encounter writing that would not be “clear” to most people (consider Passage 4), and writing that most people would not call “concise” (Passage 1). And what seems to be “logical” in one discipline might not seem “logical” from the perspective of another.

For example, a physics student, recording findings from an experiment, may be expected to privilege unbiased observation and objective recording of data, while an anthropology student, writing a report on the behaviour of a community, may be asked to recognize that the community needs to accept and even edit results. “Organization” in a book review written for a history class is not “organization” in a psychology lab report, and neither resembles “organization” in an argument essay in high school. After their long experience with the schoolroom essay, and long contact with rules and pronouncements about good writing, university students suddenly face many examples of expression that contradict the schoolroom tradition.

Genre theory tells us that the schoolroom essay—in its style—serves its situation. Inspecting the situation, we might look for connections between the kinds of features prized in student essays and the broader function of the schoolroom itself. We might consider the schoolroom’s role in socializing youth, in controlling the time of young people, in scheduling some students for further education—in well-paid occupations that structure and regulate social life—and scheduling others for vocational or service occupations. Since the essay is a persistent genre, it must be doing an adequate job of defining, and serving, and maintaining schoolroom situations.

But the schoolroom and the university classroom are different situations. Accordingly, the kind of writing that suits the schoolroom tends not to suit the university classroom. That is, these two kinds of writing represent two different genres—that is, two different blends of *situation* and *form*.

Exercise 3

Develop a list of features that, in your experience, define essays you wrote in high school. Consider in particular anything that may have been presented as a rule. (For example, “never refer to yourself in the first person.”) In each case, try to identify the social function the feature served in the high-school classroom. (Did it encourage—or discourage—certain kinds of stances, attitudes, or tones?) Present your list to the class and have your instructor comment on how many of these features pertain to writing that experienced university students—or, for that matter, university researchers—produce.

1D The University as Research Institution

The most important distinction between high-school and university situations is that the latter are located in research institutions—that is, institutions that produce new knowledge through observation, experimentation, and interpretation of the natural world and humanity, or that apply, integrate, or mobilize existing knowledge for other sectors of society. While students may see themselves as learners rather than researchers, they nevertheless do their learning under the direction of people who are trained as researchers and who read and write research publications. The knowledge that university students acquire is the kind of knowledge that comes from the techniques of inquiry developed by the various **academic disciplines**. We could go so far as to say that in the university the very wording of the facts and concepts students must absorb derives from research practice: the routines, habits, and values which motivate scholars to do the work they do. This wording represents research communities' beliefs and their members' shared techniques for interpreting the world. At the same time, such wording is also the medium in which students must work.

If university students are not writing schoolroom essays, what are they writing? What uses of language or wordings will represent the student's position in the university situation? While it would be too much to say that students should write research articles, it is not too much to say that their writing shares features of the **research genres**. After all, while the undergraduate curriculum readies most students for careers outside the university, it prepares some to assume positions as researchers in universities and other institutions. It's not surprising, then, that the information students encounter in their university courses is shaped by the research situations or academic disciplines that produced it. So, as students work with a particular type of research information—experimental data, archaeological artefacts, philosophical concepts—the style of that research genre becomes the most appropriate for them to adopt. And while the wording of research writing shares some features with the schoolroom essay—both are, after all, English—for our purposes the differences are more meaningful than the similarities. (Equally, the styles of the different disciplines share many features, but the differences are meaningful and have consequences.) This book puts student writers in touch with the language of the research genres, and in doing so it invites

students to enter the **discourse communities** where researchers conduct their work. It shows student writers what the salient, or distinguishing, features of scholarly expression are—features which distinguish the scholarly genres and which we recognize as typical of academic situations. At the same time, it encourages students to develop informed perspectives on scholarly styles and situations. As sites for shared understandings, and shared means of interpreting the world, genres can seem like worlds unto themselves—self-justifying and removed from the concerns of everyday life. But the research genres (like other genres) are not worlds unto themselves. They are involved in all the social and political complexities of their times.

Exercise 4

The styles of expression in Passages 1 to 7 differ in many respects. In the chapters which follow, you will acquire means of identifying and using salient features of 1 and 4—the two passages from research genres. But you might begin to develop your awareness of style here by inspecting and comparing all seven samples. First, and most broadly, what distinguishes 1 and 4 from the others? Second, and more narrowly, can you distinguish between the styles of 1 and 4? In approaching these tasks, you might take into account these features:

- ways the writers are represented in the text (most obviously, do they mention themselves?);
- words—their commonness (would they show up in, for example, conversation between neighbours?), their recurrence (to what degree do these writers repeat the same words?); and sentences—their length, completeness;
- capital letters, parentheses, names, dates.

How would you describe the relation between writer and reader in each of these passages?

From what you know (or can guess) about the ways of life surrounding each of these samples, estimate how each of the writers learned to write this way (on the job? in class? on a weekend seminar?).