

## A Bit about Genre and Transferring of Skills

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This article recounts the writer's experience of writing a restaurant review for the first time and the unexpected challenges he faced in the process. Starting from an assumption that writing remains same across genres, the writer finds that transferring writing skills across genres is not a straightforward process. In fact, this is where writers make the error of mixing genres.

*"Writing is writing," asserted the bard.*

*"No, it's not!" protested his friend.*

*"Oh, really? Just because I am a poet you think I can't write an obituary?"*

*"You can. But I am sure you'll butcher it. Plain and simple.*

*And just for the record let me repeat that you're a good poet."*

*"Is that a challenge?"*

*"Yes, that's a challenge."*

I am basically a fiction writer. I put lot of time and effort in writing stories. I guess imagination and storytelling come to me naturally. And yes, I enjoy to the utmost degree blurring the line between facts and fiction. No need to work on citation. No need to worry about a thesis statement. No need to even worry about the word limit. A story can practically (and successfully) vary between one sentence and 120,000 words. [One sentence story? Yes, a six-word fiction famously attributed to Ernest Hemingway: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."] Ask me to turn in a 30-page story, and I think I can pull it off. Not like I won't struggle, or hit the writer's block and stare at a

blank page for hours, or browse through the dictionary and thesaurus to get that one word right. But I will follow my foolproof and time-tested formula for story writing: have a plot (always), set up the scene, use lively details, and then let the narrative have its own course. This formula had always worked for me. And believe me, I churned out quality narratives time and again, and filled pages after pages with predictable regularity almost to the point that I started to believe I could *write*. And I started to associate myself with the word “writer” more strongly than ever before. The correlation was pretty straightforward to me: I could *write* because I am a *writer*.

Time came when I was asked to write a restaurant review. This assignment was part of my Editing and Opinion Writing class. The deadline was stiff, as always. Or you could say that I walked myself to this tight deadline. And the reasons must be obvious to you by now. It’s just another piece of writing for me, right? At least that’s how I saw it, and I had even more reasons to feel confident about this assignment and procrastinate. First of all, I am a good cook (at least that’s what I have been told), which by default credits me with an eclectic and refined palate. Note the underlined word: the very sign and armor of a food critique. Second, I have dined at numerous restaurants of diverse cuisines and class, and posted my reviews of the restaurants on online yellow-pages, receiving envious amounts of “thumbs-up” next to my posts. Third, I had gone through the New York Times’ restaurant review section, and pored over the types of gourmet food, the phrases/metaphors used to describe them, and what made the cut for a classy treat and what did not. So I got my quota of reading done in the genre. If those readings have anything to offer, then it is that opinions mattered. Of course, that’s what a “review” is about; you provide judicious critique to the reader. And in this case, I had plenty of gutsy and refined opinions to offer.

My submission was last minute, but it was to my satisfaction. Did it have an exciting opening? Check. Was the writing engaging enough? Check. Was the content original enough? Sure! So I was looking forward to my teacher’s comments, actually. And I was looking for an A. But what I got instead...well, I will let my teacher’s feedback in following image speak for itself.

On a rainy night, the chilling moisture and the foggy view of the world around can be a real downer. And to escape such feeling hot and spicy foods can be real pick-me-ups. So on such a night, I and my imaginary girlfriend (who I would refer as P for the rest of this review) were searching for an Indian restaurant and the sign of Royal India tempted us to pull over.

User 11/3/10 4:21 PM

**Comment:** Avoid this weather report. They're dull and not very helpful to the readers.

User 11/3/10 4:19 PM

**Comment:** Shailen, I have nothing against your imaginary girlfriends or muses, but please don't let them accompany you to the restaurant you review.

Having ordered for ourselves an extravagant dinner, we looked around. Even on a weekday night the restaurant was near full. The rosewood finish of the interior walls were a sharp match for the rich red upholstery, the flaming chandeliers, and the linoleum floors with the Rajasthani graffiti on them. Indian kings of colonial times adorned the wooden frames in the walls in their opulent costumes, flaunting their wax-tipped mustaches. And a lattice patterned separator obscured from our view the bar in one corner, from which direction we could see the decoration of the earthen lamps which adorned the bar counter. Their tiny flames, and their earthy and camphor fragrance, along with the lilting instrumental music gave the restaurant quite a unique and exquisite flair. When our waiter arrived with our complementary herbal drinks called Jal-jeera, a not very wholesome looking liquid at first, a twinkle sparkled at the corners of P's eyes.

User 11/3/10 4:25 PM

**Comment:** A bit too many descriptions are cluttered in one place. They'll lull the reader. Space them out or blend them with your opinion in such a way that they don't feel like a list.

User 4/16/11 11:38 AM

**Comment:** But this is not happening in reality!!!!!! It raises questions about your credibility as a REVIEWER.

As you can see from the comments section, my teacher had a lethal mix of wit and sarcasm, but he always meant well. He had read only up to the second paragraph, and comment #4 was his last feedback. Essentially, he had given up reading after this, as his end note read: “Shailen, I don’t know what to say. This reads more like a story to me than a review. I think you got the expectations of the assignment mixed-up.”

If only I could express my momentary frustration and surprise with a subtle euphemism. If only I could make my teacher believe that it is *not* a “story,” it is a review, a review, a review...but that response was short-lived, and the surprise and disappointment too. Now that it's been some years since I wrote it and built up some healthy distance between myself and the article, I can analyze it more objectively.

As I was rummaging through the old files recently, looking for suitable material to write an article for this book, I stumbled upon this old review. And when I read the first few paragraphs, a chuckle escaped me. I found myself saying: this is not a review; of course not; definitely not.

So, my teacher was right after all. I had got the two writing styles “mixed-up.” The review has all the elements of a story, which is the genre I am most comfortable writing. The first line is perhaps an apt description of the rainy night, and it portrays quite a vivid image of the outdoor atmosphere. But frankly, in a restaurant review why should the reader care about the weather

outside? How is that a beneficial piece of information to the reader about the restaurant?

The second shortcoming with my article is the chronological way the actions are listed. You can almost discern the pattern of an action-related scene, where one action leads to another. Let's trace the chain of action here: a) spotted the restaurant; b) pulled over the car; c) ordered the food; d) waiting led to observation of the details in the restaurant; e) complimentary drink arrived, etc. And I can assure you, such sequencing follows in the rest of the review, which would have worked perfectly in an action scene, but in a review it reads mechanical and predictable.

Now, the third issue, which my teacher had labeled, was listing all the details. I *love* details. My creative writing teachers had repeatedly reminded me: details are the flesh and blood of a scene. So I make sure to evoke an adequate amount of details to make my characters and setting come alive. In the review, I seemed to have followed the advice of my writing teachers quite faithfully. The details of the restaurant's ambience portray quite a lively scene: it seems to appeal to all the senses; visual, aural, olfactory, etc. But again, such detailing can seem contrived and "cluttered" for a review. Reviewers usually blend details with historical references, analogies, and opinions.

The final but the most unforgiving problem with my piece is the dispute surrounding my imaginary girlfriend. My teacher had asked me to banish her; well, it won't be easy, but with a heavy heart I guess I will have to do it. While writing fiction, I never even questioned the fantasy lands I ventured to: the more imaginative I can be, the better. So just like fiction, I thought I could invent a character for my review and make it humorous. That definitely did not go well with my teacher, who thought that I had subverted the conventions of the review genre by incorporating a fictitious element in my writing. When a restaurant's credibility is at stake and so is the reviewer's, there is no room for making things up out of thin air. Any reviewer's first advice to his/her protégé is: be honest with your reader. This is the fundamental convention of the review genre, which is the complete opposite of creative writing. This is a gross "mixing-up" of my understanding of the two genres. Writing does *change*, and I wish I knew that beforehand.

As far as the rest of my review is concerned, I can assure you that there were many original and palatable opinions in place. But only if my teacher could have gotten past my colossal blunder, then he would have known.

*“Writing obituary is similar to writing poetry; both deal with compassion and human emotion.”*

*“True, but then one is prose and the other is poetry... as unlike as a duck and a rooster.”*

*“But at the core both need robust language and vivid imagery.”*

*“No. One is fact and the other is muse.”*

*“I’ve already started writing. Can you hear the tapping of the keys?”*

*“Yes, I am hearing the rhymes of an elegy.”*

We all know that writing style changes. Writing a poem is not same as writing a personal essay. And the conventions and styles of an editorial are not similar to those of a research paper. But certain writing styles come to us easily. Our cognitive response sometimes favors one genre over the other. And the genre in which we do well, we tend to internalize its writing strategies and often unknowingly we apply the same strategies to tackle another genre.

Before I started writing my review I was well aware that a restaurant review is not similar to a story. Yet, unknowingly I tried to transfer the conventions of fiction writing to this review piece. And the result was disastrous. I had internalized the story writing strategies to such a degree that while tackling an unfamiliar genre I used scene-building, detailing, and chronological sequencing to convey my opinions.

Knowing myself, I am sure that I am not immune to the tendencies of transferring writing skills. So the key is knowing how far I can go with transfer and where to stop. So I have decided to prepare a set of rules for myself which will ***make me pause*** before I unknowingly transfer writing strategies from one genre to another. The following are the rules I pledge to follow before I sit down to write in an unfamiliar genre:

- A) **Knowing the genre that’s my strength:** I think this first step is an acknowledgement that no two genres are the same. If I am good at certain kinds of writing, then I must make a list of them. Of course, this list will not stay the same all my life. It’s not like I am biologically modeled to be good at only one or two genres. As I accumulate experiences in different kinds of writing under diverse writing situations, I will keep getting better at multiple genres, and the list will keep getting longer. But for now, the genres that don’t make it to the list need my special attention and a critical/analytical approach rather than a spontaneous one. The goal is that such heightened awareness will encourage me to learn the *differences*

between the familiar and the new genres quickly and proactively, rather than waiting to commit the mistake of “mix-up.”

B) **Knowing the writing skills that come to me easily:** Certain writing tasks I manage really well. For example, I am good at writing opinion essays, especially editorial style writing. I am the guy who can take a clear stance and justify it in a most cogent and persuasive articulation. So the genre of opinion writing can be easily tackled by me because I am a straightforward and rational thinker, and the knack of persuasion is second nature to me. If I were to make a list of the things that I must be doing right in editorial writing, then the list may look like the following:

Taking a stance in the essay very early on. And not being afraid or hesitant to do so.

Taking into consideration counter-arguments effectively to strengthen my argument, thus adding to the persuasiveness of the essay.

Linking one argument to the next, thus building a chain of arguments in a structural manner.

Avoiding unnecessary jargon. Writing in a literary manner, yet not wordy or pompous, so that it diminishes the mass appeal of the writing.

Summarizing the information or the news for the reader succinctly: it's the awareness that the reader might not have come across the news; so selecting a precise amount of details that cover the context of the issue is the key.

Conclusion. Yes, a strong conclusion that urges the reader to pay attention to the issue and take action.

C) **Knowing the demands of the new genre:** Here is the tricky part. If I am not careful enough here, then I will repeat my mistake of “mixing-up.” Let's say I am offered an internship at a publishing house. And my first assignment is to write a blurb for a literary fiction. I make a list of writing demands of the blurb genre: summarizing the plot, using very literary language, appearing informative about the authors' works and the book's merit, and being persuasive about the book's appeal, etc.

Certainly, there are many similarities between the editorial and the blurb genre. But I would call these similarities *pitfalls* because what appear like similarities are actually the areas where I will most likely attempt to transfer my writing skills (deliberately or instinctively). Sometimes such transfer would work and sometimes it would not, like the restaurant review. But I am not going to take chances; plus this kind of comparison will lessen the pressure on me as I learn a new kind of writing. So I am off now to play, what I call, a *pitfall game*, a game of identifying *similarities* between two writing genres that are not so similar after all.

## Editorial vs. Blurb Writing

**Pitfall 1)** Summarization: Summary of a news report in an editorial and summary of a plot *for a blurb* are not the same. The former demands that no information be held back, whereas if I summarize the *whole* plot of the book in the blurb, then most likely I will be fired. Yes, no spoiler alerts please. I must remember that the key to a blurb summary is to know how much to summarize and which parts of the plot to summarize. Again, the logic behind such truncated summarization is to give away only enticing details in order to encourage the reader to *buy the book*.

**Pitfall 2)** Persuasion: Persuasiveness in an editorial demands the reader to take notice of an issue or take action, whereas the blurbs are expected to persuade the reader to buy the book. So the editor persuades to draw attention for public good, whereas the blurb writer persuades purely for the marketing purpose. Note: the audience in these two cases is completely different, and the manner of persuasion will change with it too.

**Pitfall 3)** Language: Jargon is not entirely a no-no in blurbs. In fact, not using jargon at all may alienate certain readers. The key is to use theoretical or academic catch phrases that do not sound too intellectual or intimidating to the average readers, but at the same time expand the market to scholarly customers. For example, by hailing the work of an author as a masterpiece in “Post-Modernism” or “Slipstream” may do this trick.

**Pitfall 4)** Writing style: the familiar writing style to me is the logical and rational connection of arguments. But, in a blurb such writing may turn out to be too mechanical. Opposite to an objective and rational approach, a narrative style will appeal more to the reader.

So if I don't watch out, then my writing for the blurb may turn out to be too rigid and formal.

After having invented the *pitfall game* for myself and having applied it to my writing, I make this note to myself: comparing one genre to another and listing the known *similarities* is the first step of this game. The second step is to find out the *differences within these apparent similarities* by the exercise of *doubting*.

I have to remember that the pitfall game is not foolproof. So I need not be complacent. But knowing that I have to play this game when I face a new writing genre reminds me of how writing skills are not easily transferable across genres. And this helps as far as my new writing mantra is concerned: *Writing is not the same. It changes.* And don't you worry about the duel between the poet and his friend. The latter had already hired a professional to write the obituary for his grandmother.





**Shailen Mishra** plans to become rich by signing a million dollar book deal on his first novel; then he will appear on *Oprah* becoming a notable mention in her book club; and then he will win the Booker Prize. After that he will retire to a lifelong adventure in traveling, writing only for leisure and pleasure: if only such a thing exists.

