Here's a Tip: Receipts Are Genres

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In this article, Ola Al-Refae shares her experience with reading receipts in the US and in her home country, Jordan. She discusses different types of receipts and how they are considered genres by closely looking at their conventions. Al-Refae further explains how receipts work in an activity system using P-CHAT terms as a guide.

When I moved from Jordan to the US to obtain my PhD in English studies at Illinois State University (ISU), I knew I would face many challenges living by myself. Back home in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, my parents did everything for me; they paid the bills, bought groceries, and paid for our meals when we ate in restaurants. Life was much easier. When I went out with my friends, I used to pay for my own meals, but it wasn't complicated at all. The cashier tells me the price, and I pay the same amount with no issues whatsoever. However, when I moved to the US, I did not know that the first confusing thing I would encounter would be paying for meals.

My first meal here in the US was in Chicago, IL. I went to a restaurant after a twelve-hour flight from Jordan, and all I wanted was a nice meal to make me forget how sad I was to leave my country, friends, and family. I ordered a great meal that I enjoyed, and the waiter was really welcoming and nice. After eating the meal and paying for it, the waiter came back with two other receipts and a pen and left them on my table. Because I was extremely tired, I did not bother to read what was written on the receipts. The only

thing I saw was that one said customer's copy and the other said merchant copy, so I took my copy and left with no questions asked.

The next day, before heading to Normal, IL, I thought I would go to the same restaurant to have a nice meal because I knew I had a long journey ahead. What surprised me the most is that the waiter this time was not as welcoming as they were the day before. I wondered why the service was so radically different. I also wondered why I paid more than what the menu listed, so I told my friend about it who lives in the US, and I asked her why this was the case. The only answer I received from her was, "You're in the US now, you pay tax. And the waiter is maybe upset because you didn't leave them a good tip." My response was, "What? But I'm a foreigner!" and "What do you mean?"

I realized, later on, that tax is added right before they give you the receipt and that tipping in the US is a part of the culture. It is considered rude to not leave a tip, while in my country it is something optional that people don't usually expect to receive. And that's why I decided to explore receipts as a genre and an activity system.

Food for Thought: Genre and Activity System

According to the ISU Writing Program, an **activity system** is key to understanding how a particular genre works. Receipts are a **genre**, which is defined as a type of text that is used to make an action possible or impossible. For example, when we want to buy groceries from Costco, we need to make a payment in order to take the groceries home and receipts are one of the tools we need to make the process possible as it is proof of payment. Therefore, each payment we make has its own activity system with its own purposes, and each one of these payments has a receipt that helps achieve the goal. When thinking about the activity system that includes receipts, it is fair to say that receipts are not the only genre involved in situations where people are purchasing goods and/or services. For example, in the activity system of eating in or ordering food from a restaurant, other genres and tools involved might include menus, food items, apps, credit cards, cash, conversations, and so on. And all of these things are understood by participants in particular ways based on their prior experiences with other similar activities. Not

Activity Systems

According to David Russell and Arturo Yañez, activity systems are cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal. As a lens, the activity system helps us to analyze the psychological and social processes of achieving that goal. Each system has a goal(s), which is achieved through the work of people and the tools they use (Russell and Yañez).

only would the activity system be different if one were ordering for take-out or delivery vs. dining in, different kinds of restaurants and places that sell prepared meals use these tools and genres differently. In addition, as in my case, in different geographical locations and cultures, the activity system of ordering meals might have genres that are identified as similar (e.g., a receipt), but that work differently. If we take restaurant receipts from the US and Jordan as examples, the process would not be the same, and I'll explain why in the following paragraphs. Table 1 below shows how the activity systems would compare:

The subject here is the customer in two different places trying to achieve the payment goal or get proof of payment, which is done using receipts as tools.

But how are receipts a genre? Aren't genres horror, romance, and comedy? According to the ISU Writing Program, it's much more than that. Another definition of a **genre** is "a typified response to a recurring situation" (The Word Bird). In other words, it is a text that is produced in response to

Table 1: This table compares the process of interacting with a restaurant—and receiving receipts—in Illinois to an equivalent activity system in Jordan.

Steps	In Illinois	In Jordan
1	Search online to find and read about the restaurant.	Same as in Illinois
2	Go to the restaurant and interact with the wait staff.	Same
3	Read a menu and choose what you'd like.	Same
4	Receive the order and enjoy it.	Same
5	Receive the receipt.	Same
6	Pay cash or card or use an app.	Usually, pay in cash, but sometimes you might use cards.
7	Receive another receipt.	End transaction.
8	Add the tip.	
9	Leave one receipt on the table for the restaurant.	
10	Take the copy of the receipt that says "customer's copy."	

a situation. For example, we can say that a receipt (the response) is produced as proof of payment or in some cases to make the payment possible (the recurring situation). There are many different types of receipts. There are receipts that we receive from restaurants, shops, pharmacies, grocery stores, movie theaters, etc.

We can also have physical receipts that can be either printed or handwritten depending on the store and the country. You can have the receipt sent to your E-mail or as a text to your phone number, which is being used in various countries lately to reduce paper waste and save the environment. All of these texts are called receipts, but if we think about it for a moment, what is it that makes us understand these virtual interactions as the same genre as the printed version? How are they used similarly and differently? A lot of people would prefer to have their receipts as a physical copy because that would be easier for them to read and go back to instead of losing them with other documents on their digital devices. Many banks nowadays send receipts as notifications, E-mails, or even text messages to the owner of the bank account to notify them that a transaction has occurred from their account, which makes it easier when someone else is using the card because you would know where and when they used it, as well as the amount that was taken out of your account. There are many more receipts that can be examined and studied, as each one has its own purpose for existing. If we were to try to determine the conventions of receipts, we might list features that are found on many but not all of them. And we might also find texts that we could call receipts, but that don't have some of these key features or conventions. In particular, if we move into very different kinds of related activity systems (like eating in restaurants in one country or another), we might find more variation and key elements that are quite different from what we'd expect from a basic analysis of the conventions in the activity system we know more intimately. Let's discuss this in more detail.

Receipts are everywhere, so people are used to seeing them without thinking of them as genres. Although we have different kinds of receipts, we know how to read each one and differentiate between them without any confusion or extra effort. They have many common and different **genre conventions**, or features, that help us recognize one type of receipt from another. Some of the common conventions that we might see on almost every receipt are the date and time, which are there as proof of when the transaction happened. This makes it easier for both the store and the customer to go back and check records or surveillance when an issue occurs. The name of the store or restaurant is almost always there at the top of

Genre Conventions

Genre conventions are the features of each genre that can help us recognize it and differentiate it from other genres (ISU Writing Program).

the receipt to make it easier for everyone to know where the transaction took place. The phone number of the store/restaurant is also a convention that you can often find on the receipt as a means of communication that the customer can use to contact the store. The items or the service provided are also listed on the receipt to make it clear what the customer is paying for. The price is usually there next to the item to clarify how much each item or service costs and at the end of the receipt you will see the total price paid.

There are conventions that are common amongst all types of receipts, but there are also those conventions that are different, such as tips and tax. When Americans see the word "tip" on a receipt, they would immediately understand that it is for a restaurant or a café. However, people from different countries can find this confusing if they don't tip in their home countries, because they wouldn't have that printed on their receipts. In this case, it is our **antecedent knowledge** that is telling us how to read this genre based on our past experiences and knowledge. For example, my antecedent knowledge
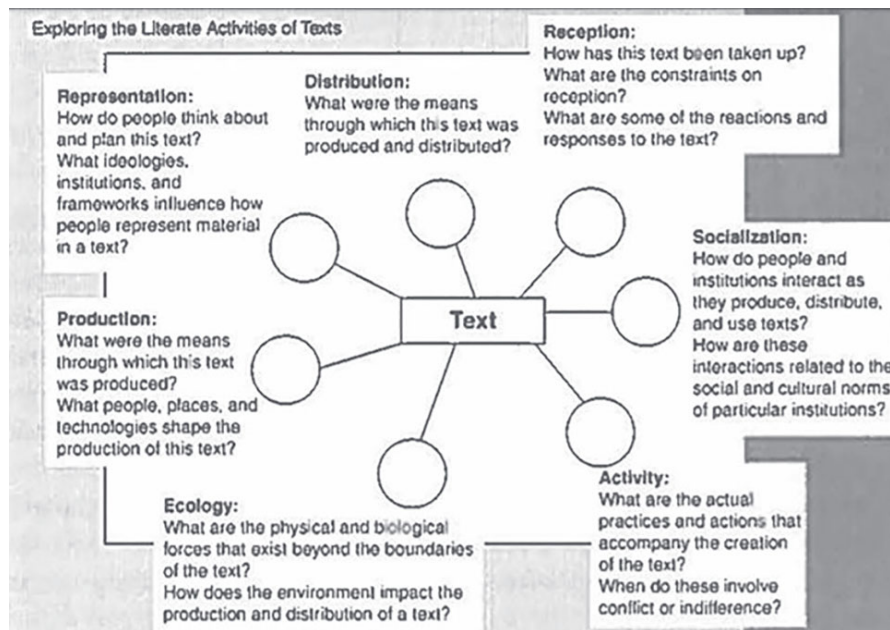
> **Antecedent Knowledge**
>
> Antecedent knowledge is the knowledge that is gained from our past experiences and learning that comes into play when taking up any kind of genre (ISU Writing Program). This happens in ways that are both conscious and unconscious.

tells me that I'll pay the same amount I see on the menu. However, a person living in Illinois would have antecedent knowledge telling them that tax will be included later on. To better understand the differences in these genres and the activity systems, let's use the lens of P-CHAT.

P-CHAT: A Seven-Course Meal

P-CHAT is a term used in the ISU Writing Program, which stands for pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory. It can be easily understood when it is broken down into its seven sub-concepts, which are distribution, reception, ecology, production, socialization, representation, and activity (Figure 1).

For this article, I'll use three of these sub-concepts to analyze receipts as genres: production, distribution, and reception.

Let's first take a look at what a receipt is. A receipt is a document that is usually handed to the customer as proof of payment or ownership. They are produced for various reasons, such as when they are legally required for certain kinds of transactions in order to keep track of the tax owed to the government. It is also produced so customers can use it to return or exchange items. Some customers like to keep receipts to calculate their

Exploring the Literate Activities of Texts

Representation:
How do people think about and plan this text?
What ideologies, institutions, and frameworks influence how people represent material in a text?

Distribution:
What were the means through which this text was produced and distributed?

Reception:
How has this text been taken up?
What are the constraints on reception?
What are some of the reactions and responses to the text?

Text

Socialization:
How do people and institutions interact as they produce, distribute, and use texts?
How are these interactions related to the social and cultural norms of particular institutions?

Production:
What were the means through which this text was produced?
What people, places, and technologies shape the production of this text?

Ecology:
What are the physical and biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of the text?
How does the environment impact the production and distribution of a text?

Activity:
What are the actual practices and actions that accompany the creation of the text?
When do these involve conflict or indifference?

Figure 1: A graphic describing the P-CHAT concepts from the ISU Writing Program.

monthly spending. Therefore, there are many types of receipts for different purposes, so when we think of **production**, we must consider various things since it is an umbrella term that involves the interactions of people, tools, and regulations that go into producing a genre. A receipt is usually created after a group of people talks about the products they are selling or the service they offer. Then, they decide on the price of each item or service and register it into their system or write it down. They make sure the receipts include the information needed for the specific service or product. However, the information on a receipt is also concise since, in most cases, receipts are not written in sentences or paragraphs, and they are not usually very long. Thus, different receipts have different information as the goal in an activity system varies. For example, a sales receipt when you buy new shoes might have a return or a refund policy written on it, so when you return the shoes, you need to have the receipt with you to show the date you bought the shoes to see if it's eligible to be returned or refunded.

There are also two different types of receipts that we interact with in our everyday lives, such as invoices and sales receipts. Sales receipts are the ones we receive when we buy goods, and they work as proof of exchange and payment. Invoices, on the other hand, work as payment requests; for example, we receive an invoice for the amount we need to pay for our electricity and water, and after paying the amount, we receive a receipt as

proof of payment. Also, if we want to paint the house or the apartment, we receive an invoice after the work is done to tell us about the service we received and the money we owe. Invoices are usually more detailed than sale receipts since they have been created to ask for money, give the customers more details about the amount for each service provided, and include the due date for the payment. Therefore, the way they are produced differs according to their goal and type.

When creating a receipt, the seller might check with the government regulations to check the amount of tax they need to apply. In a more complicated transaction, a lawyer might also play a part in the production to make sure everything is being done according to the law. Additionally, these days, the seller usually needs specialized equipment for printing out receipts and taking payments. In the past, when receipts were still mostly written manually, a seller might buy a pad of receipts and handprint information on them. These receipt pads often use some kind of carbon paper or similar technology that creates a second copy of what is written on the sheet.

The second P-CHAT sub-concept is distribution. **Distribution** is the way in which a genre is given to a certain audience. Receipts can be distributed hand to hand on printed papers, which might require a computer and printers, or be done using handwriting on a receipt pad. Some places do not offer paper receipts anymore to avoid harming the environment. However, they offer to send receipts as texts or E-mails; to do this, a computer, Internet connection, and a special program are needed. In other places, you get to choose to have a printed receipt, E-mail receipt, or both.

Reception involves the way that people take up or use a genre they encounter. The reception of receipts can be a bit complicated because people will perceive them differently according to their antecedent knowledge. Let me explain this further. Some people, or I should say, me, don't really like receipts. I always pay the amount and leave the receipt. However, when I came to the US, I learned to keep every receipt in case I want to return, refund, or just keep track of my finances. Other people might keep the receipts for their tax returns. Others like to keep receipts in case they need them for different reasons; my mom, for example, still keeps receipts from twenty-seven years ago. Whenever I ask about the price of something we bought a long time ago, she will immediately search for the old receipt to find the information.

The way different people react to or read a receipt is different. Some people enjoy learning about how many items they bought and the price of each one individually on one piece of paper. Other people like to look at the amount of tax they paid when they bought the items or received the service.
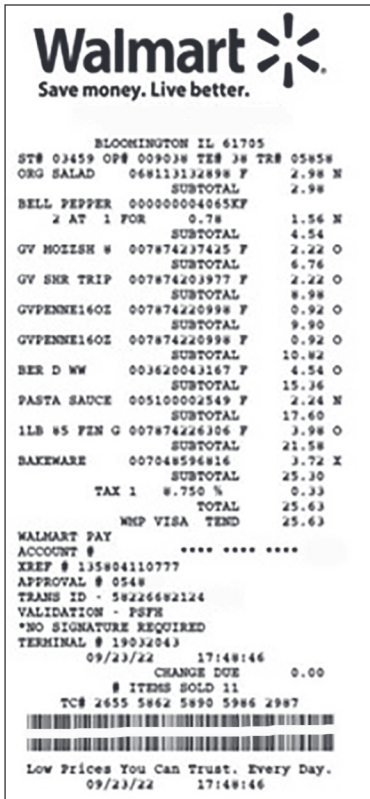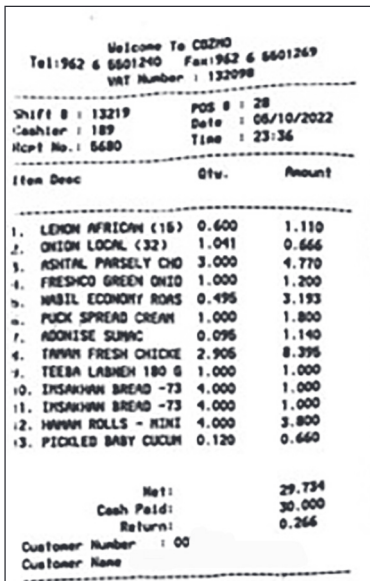
Figure 2: A US Walmart receipt.

Figure 3: A Jordan grocery store receipt.

Others like to check the information and other details provided on the receipts, such as special offers or return and refund policies. The receipt in Figure 2 is from a Walmart in Bloomington, IL. This receipt's goal is to give the customer proof of payment. For a customer who lives in Illinois, their antecedent knowledge would help them read this receipt, so it is not confusing at all because they already know what this kind of receipt looks like. However, a person who is from out of state or comes from another country might immediately wonder why they are paying more than what they thought the price was or why the return and the refund policy is not written on the receipt itself. The tax rate in the US differs from state to state because each state has its own laws. That is why at the end of the receipt, you would see a percentage of tax added to your total. But maybe, for a person who comes from Portland, which is in a state where they don't have a sales tax, it would take them some time to understand why the price is different than what the item says.

For me, in Jordan, the prices of items almost always include the tax percentage, so the amount you see on the item is the exact amount you pay at the cashier. The receipt in Figure 3 is from a grocery store in Jordan. You can see that in the receipt, we don't have the convention of tax. That doesn't mean that we don't pay tax in Jordan, but unlike in the US, this country has a unified tax system. This means that no matter where you go in Jordan, you pay the same amount of tax, which is included in the price of each item.

Therefore, we can say that the conventions of genres or receipts not only differ according to their goals but also according to their location. Let's look at another example: restaurant receipts usually have a "tip" on them. However, in some cultures, such as China, tipping is considered disrespectful, so you don't usually find it on the receipt. In the US, giving a tip is something expected from the person who's receiving the service. In some restaurants,

the customer receives one receipt with the total price of the food, which is usually labeled the "customer copy" (Figure 4), then they receive another receipt that allows them to add the amount of tip they want to give. This amount is usually a certain percentage of the total price (ten to twenty percent), so the customer needs to do the calculations and add the tip to the total of the receipt. Even if they consider the service not as good as expected, they usually give the least percentage (ten percent) and rarely leave without providing a tip as it is a cultural norm. In some restaurants or cafes, the customer is asked to add the tip to the machine before printing the receipt, and this way the customer will only get one receipt instead of two, as in this receipt from the Starbucks at the Hyatt in downtown Bloomington, IL (Figure 5). Yet, most receipts from a restaurant, café, bakery, or other store that serves edible things in the US (not just Illinois) would include a place for a tip.

I have mentioned earlier that tipping in some countries is considered disrespectful, but in other countries such as Jordan, tipping is considered something optional that the customer provides when they feel like the service was exceptional. It is only applicable if the customer would like to show appreciation to the provider or the worker. Tips in Jordan, if given, are usually given by palming (placing money in your palm and shaking the server's hand) or simply by leaving it on the table before leaving. Therefore, receipts in Jordan do not include the tip even if it was given to the worker. Another difference is that on this Starbucks receipt from Jordan (Figure 6), there is a return and refund policy that is written at

Figure 4: A US restaurant receipt.

Figure 5: A US Starbucks receipt.

Figure 6: A Jordan Starbucks receipt.

the bottom of the receipt. In Jordan, returns and refunds are not really that common; many stores prohibit such policies, and no one understands the reason for that. However, when a store or shop offers such a policy, it would be written at the bottom of the receipt so people could learn it.

I'm Stuffed—Check Please!

Learning about genre and the activity system of receipts might seem like a complicated process for looking at something that is so simple, but tools such as P-CHAT can help us understand how things around us operate within their sociocultural context. To understand the differences in these receipts, I had to talk to my friends in the US so they could explain the tipping system to me, and I had to search online to better understand why the price doesn't include the tax. I had to go through the process of searching, asking questions, and experimenting with the P-CHAT map and activity system in order to understand how receipts are genres and how that genre might look and operate differently depending on the place where the genre is produced.

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