

## Genres are Everywhere! (Even in a Circus)

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The Gamma Phi Circus has been a special organization at Illinois State University since 1929. There are specific people who devote so much time to the circus here that it has become their main career. In this article, Williams, a freshman member of the circus, interviews the circus director, Marcus Alouan, on what is so unique about his career and what types of genres and writing are included in supporting the Gamma Phi Circus.

### Introduction

Throughout all of the years that I have spent growing up, writing was definitely not one of my strengths unless it involved creativity. I have never achieved decent grades in English classes for my first few drafts of assignments, and I would have to work extra hard and put in more time than other students to succeed. I remember asking my parents, “Why am I taking English class and writing essays if I do not want to become a writer when I grow up?” Their answer was that it was required to graduate and it would be useful for my life as an adult. I did not like that answer and as the stubborn teen that I was, I continued to complain about the fact that I was required to take English in college, even after my four consistent and painful years of boring assignments in high school. I then realized that, of course, my parents and teachers were correct, but they left out an important detail: the fact is that these terms and concepts that we learn in lectures are everywhere around us—in our jobs, our extracurriculars, and even our favorite movies. They don’t have to be learned or thought about in a negative, dry way. But enough about my experiences; it is time to stop the talk about my life and writing and get to the real details of this article.



Figure 1: Gamma Phi Circus (bgriffrob, 2012).

## An Introduction to Genres

What is a **genre**? You may already know the answer to this question from previous writing classes, but you may have also learned a different definition. While I was growing up, genres were said to be broad types of movies or writing, such as nonfiction, fiction, horror, historical fiction, science fiction, and many others. So, my freshman year in English 101.10, my instructor had asked the class, “What is a genre?” and I happened to respond with, “Fiction or nonfiction.” She looked at me as if she were expecting more from me but that was all that I knew. That day, she gave an entire hour-and-fifteen-minute lesson on how genres are much more than a type of writing or movie. They can be present in pretty much everything if one takes the time to analyze it. The definition of a genre used in the ISU writing program is stated as:

... a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable. It is important to understand that, in our program, we (mostly) don't use the word genre to refer to categories of things, the way it's used in music or literature (Rock, Pop, R&B, Rap or Fiction, Non-fiction, Poetry). Instead, when we use genres, we're usually referring to kinds of texts that can be produced. (Isuwriting.com)

There are over 100 genres or types of writing, not to mention the genres that are present in other types of communication. All of the writing assignments that you have done in your previous education involved different types of genres. Your everyday extracurricular activities involve different types of genres. Something as simple as a wall covered in old pieces of

bubblegum is a type of genre, believe it or not, and I read this information in Issue 9.1 of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. This article I am writing is even a genre. *Genres can be connected with different types of careers as well, because every career involves writing different genres which can be analyzed.*

## But Isn't This Article About the Gamma Phi Circus? Why Are We Talking About Other Things?

Many ISU students still don't know that there is a collegiate level circus on campus, which is crazy because many people from different states come to watch the annual show in April. The Gamma Phi Circus (Figure 1) is one of two college circuses in the US; the other one is in Florida. ISU's student organization has been around since 1929 and is celebrating its ninetieth anniversary this year. Figures 2 and 3 are some images of performers in previous shows.

As a freshman at ISU, joining the Gamma Phi Circus was one of the greatest decisions that I have made, because I grew up with a background in gymnastics and tumbling. I even went to their annual summer circus camps for many years because I loved the opportunity to learn new skills that I never would have imagined. After high school, I was not interested in doing any sports at the collegiate level, and the circus became my main focus.

If you were asked what the most important job or part of the circus was, what would you end up saying? Many people would choose their answer to be the performers, while a smaller amount may choose the ringmaster, and the rest would choose the circus animals. However, we do not have animals in the Gamma Phi Circus. Taking a closer look into the performing arts, there are many other roles besides what automatically comes to mind when one thinks



Figure 2: GPC 2017 German Wheel (Kennedy, 2017).



Figure 3: GPC 2017 Triple Trapeze (B104, 2017).

of a *circus*. The circus would never be successful without the help of the stage crew, costume designers, tech and sound helpers, and the volunteers. But I would say that the most important jobs of circus would be the director and assistant director. The director of the Gamma Phi Circus is Marcus Alouan, and this will be his ninth year taking on this role. The assistant director is Ivan Stoinev, a circus performer married to Maritza Atayde, an aerial acts coach. Stoinev and Atayde come from generations of circus families. They have helped out with the Gamma Phi Circus since 2013 and both of their sons have performed in it. There are many other important faculty, staff, and students who devote their time to the circus, but listing them out would take longer and perhaps become boring. If you are interested in learning more, be sure to look up the circus at ISU and even stop by the Horton Gym, located across from Tri Towers.

### Genres in Circus? Imagine that!

You would think that, with having the job of helping the circus, one would be organizing and planning the shows for every year and choosing acts for the show in April. It is a lot more complicated than that, and almost all of the jobs require—drumroll—writing and composing different types of genres! It helps to keep everything in words when trying to organize a circus so that important information will not be forgotten later on. Also, think of all of the advertising that the circus does in order to help recruit new people among campus—someone has to make those posters or flyers that are handed out to students every fall. For every April show, there is a program with all of



Figure 4: GPC 2010 Acro Sport acrobats  
(Illinois State University, 2010).

the names and bios of the performers, their pictures along with the act they perform in, some advertisements, and messages from parents encouraging their children. That program is a genre itself. Besides the shows in April, the Gamma Phi Circus sells videos of the performances; circus products such as juggling balls, scarves, and frisbees; and also apparel. Even though these are composed of little or no writing, each one is a different type of genre. Genres do not need to be limited to writing or productions; they can be almost anything. Another example of a genre in circus could be a performance or exhibition composed of its own themes and ideas. Since circus itself is a form of art and performance, the genres and different ideas from creative minds are almost endless.

### Genres in the Circus from Another's Perspective

To provide better details about the history of the Gamma Phi Circus and the types of genres present, I decided to interview our circus director, Marcus Alouan (seen in Figure 5), about his experiences and use of them in the program. I had previously explained the English definition of genres to him, and he told me that he knew it pretty well and understood what my questions meant.

#### 1. What are some specific types of genres in circus?

Circus itself is the inspirer of genres around the world, because there are stories, movies, and literature that fascinate people on the topic of circus. More and more continue to be uncovered each year. Maureen Brunsdale, curator of special collections at Milner Library, has been able to decipher letters and bookkeeping of traveling shows to describe what was happening with circuses all throughout history, mostly in the '20s and '30s. Our historical records could be considered a special genre, our correspondence with others about our organization, and all of the things I listed before.

#### 2. How long have you been the Director of the Gamma Phi Circus?

This would be my eighth full year.



Figure 5: Marcus Alouan, GPC Director (Kennedy, 2017).

**3. The shows in April have a different theme every year. What is the theme for the April 2019 show? What were some of your favorite shows over the years and the themes?**

Our 2019 show will actually be a surprise, but we will be celebrating our ninetieth year on campus. Broadway in 2017 was definitely my favorite overall for themes. Even though I lack experience in Broadway shows, I loved the music, and it was fun putting the acts together.

**4. I have noticed the CIRCUS posters hanging from the wall on the gym. Could you explain what each letter stands for and how it is enforced here?**

**Commitment** is incredibly important in our circus because without it, performers would not be able to achieve a high level of skill.

**Integrity** is an important life skill; we want to develop well-rounded leaders and citizens, and there are many examples that come from pursuing the circus arts.

**Respect** is what we ask of our members toward all, including other members. This helps promote a positive environment in the gym so everybody can achieve their best.

**Courage** is essential, not only to do the physical feats that we do, but also being willing to do it in front of thousands of people. Courage is also important because we ask our members to be courageous in their auditions, as well as living out the rest of the circus values, such as integrity. The right thing to do isn't always the easiest thing to do.

**Unity** is what connects us with the rest of the members and allows us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. It involves working as a team.

**Service** is essential because without it, we couldn't accomplish a show on the size and scale of what we do.

**5. What types of writing are produced to help out the circus? In other words, is there a specific newspaper or pamphlet that is handed out across campus to help spread the news of the circus, or are there many different types of writing used to make it more popular?**

There are quite a few different types: we have membership manuals that can be a little bit more technical and detail-oriented, newsletters that keep our alumni and supporters informed as to what's going on in

our program, correspondence with perspective members such as high schoolers considering to come to ISU, social media posts that connect us with the greater community, and we record our history and major events each year. There are many different types of writing, such as newspapers and some pamphlets that are handed out, along with magazine articles. We also write scripts for our radio ads for our performances—either I write them or Tom, our ringmaster, does.

## So Genres and Writing Can Be in Any Career? Really?

This may disappoint some of the readers who are not fans of writing, but writing is involved in pretty much every type of job out there. The amount of workload varies, of course, but it is always required if you apply and get accepted for a job. Genres, however, can be much more than writing. They are in everything around you and can tell their own story. Analyzing genres is another skill that will be acquired in your life, because it is important not just to look at something, but to understand it as well. This may be overwhelming at first, but experience with more genres will make it less stressful. Your genre adventure has just begun, and there is much more to come.

## Final Thoughts

The reason I chose this topic to write about is because when I was first introduced to genres in grade school, my interpretation was very shallow, and I thought that genres only existed in books and movies. My freshman year of college, I learned a completely different definition of genres that confused me and was a lot to take in. And the fact that I was learning about genres in English class made me believe that the term was only associated with works of literature. After lessons this year in this class, I have learned that expanding my mind makes one realize that not everything has a specific way. In other words, I realized that almost anything can be a genre. For example, it would be hard to even imagine a circus without all of the different genres associated with it. I want to show others that English does not have to be a boring, required subject, but that one can bring their favorite things into this class and learn the genres within them. Not everyone likes writing or is skilled at it, and that is why it is great that genres can be applied to almost anything. I wrote about the Gamma Phi Circus because circus performing is one of my favorite things to do.

Finally, the most important takeaway for me during this experience was that writing can be interesting if it's possible to write about something you



are passionate about. Also, I have become stronger as a writer by learning to meet a genre's conventions and aspects, while at the same time being creative—as long as I am making my point and backing it up. Just remember these words: *if you don't like to write, using genres can provide a way to start writing, especially when you are able to do homework or writing assignments about something you love!*

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**Natalie Williams** wrote this article while a freshman at Illinois State. She is now a sophomore pursuing a degree in Exercise Science, Class of 2022. After that, she plans on applying to the ISU accelerated BSN program, hopefully staying on at ISU another year and a half. She is an active member of the Gamma Phi Circus and has wanted to join it since she first attended the summer camp at age nine. When she is not at the circus or in class, she is either drinking Starbucks or binge-watching Netflix.



