

Activism and Activity: How Posters Work as Genres of Protest

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In this article, Eric Korankye explores the genre composition of posters¹ and placards that are used universally in protest marches, examining the ways in which they communicate information. Korankye applies the Writing Program's version of CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) in order to examine how posters serve as rhetorical genres and historical artifacts.

“He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.
 (“Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” 1963)

The phenomenon of protest marches is not new; it has been in existence since the beginning of human civilization. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States is a well-known example that used nonviolence and civil disobedience under the direction of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders, to combat racial inequality and advance civil rights, to current protests on climate change. Today, we're seeing movements all over the world working to protest climate change. Historically, these protests have been used as an alternative medium for people to voice their displeasure at injustices and systemic defects.

1. A large piece of paper or cardstock, typically featuring writing and/or pictures. Posters often function as notices, advertisements, or decoration.



Figure 1: Civil rights protest.
(Wikimedia Commons. Warren K. Leffler/Public domain)



Figure 2: Climate change protest.
(Wikimedia Commons. ChiralJon / CC BY.)

Across the globe, human lives are progressively endangered, rights of people are continuously infringed upon, and the futures of young people are being jeopardized. When it becomes unbearable, “the only weapon that we have in our hands . . . is the weapon of protest . . . We have no alternative but to protest . . .” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 1955).

Today, people protest regarding a wide range of causes, including gender activism, rape culture, human rights abuse, misogyny, sexual harassment, corruption in political spaces, socioeconomic injustices, gender inequality, religious intolerance, xenophobia, culture dereliction, voyeurism and sexual abuse, climate change, racism, and much more. Protest marches have proven to be an effective mechanism for creating awareness about issues—writing has, too.

A Sociocultural Perspective of Posters

People all over the world understand the rhetorics of protests, regardless of their differences in language, culture, and sociological make-up. Protests are born out of a resistance to a disorder and usually this resistance is couched in a theme. You may be familiar with hashtags or taglines such as *BlackLivesMatter*, *MeToo*, *OpenUpLegalEducation*, *SaveOurClimateNow*, and what have you. Themes and catchphrases can be found in most protest movements, and they often make their way onto posters.

Culturally, it’s important to be aware of how writing is accomplished differently in cultures and communities beyond the environments we are familiar with, including social, civic, and professional settings. Learning to make ethical and responsive decisions about writing within (and across) different cultures and communities is a key activity to the multimodal composition of posters.

Protests speak a lot about the group, society, organization, or movement which is embarking on the protest. When groups embark on protest to demand dignity, respect, or their human or civil rights, it creates a worldview about them. It either reaffirms people’s perception about them or deconstructs misperceptions about them. For example, in Ghana, where I’m from, almost every protestor wears a red t-shirt, with a red hand band or headband. Red depicts anger, seriousness, and danger in Ghana, whereas a color such as white depicts joy and happiness. Due to the seriousness of protest marches, you would rarely find any protestor in Ghana in a white shirt. Red is the default color, and this is culturally rooted.



Figure 3: A section of protestors in Ghana all clad in red t-shirts and headbands.

In the US, on the other hand, people might wear a range of colors—except in situations where they purposefully use a uniform color to tell a story or send a message.

Posters used in protest marches are also archived as historical artifacts. A quick Internet image search of “protests the world has witnessed” will give you results of posters used in various protests from the past. Such archives are good for preserving history. The phenomenon of protests is old, but the effluxion of time has seen to the change in the modus operandi of the ways in which protest posters are created has changed over time. Some decades ago, posters had to be handwritten, painted, or drawn. These days, in addition to these techniques, some posters are more sophisticated in their design and can be professionally printed or stenciled because of the advancement in technology. The audience dynamics have also changed dramatically as a result of the modern information dissemination tools we have today; in the past, only passersby could witness protests and see the posters that were used, but these days, they can be streamed live by the media or other broadcast techniques for people across the world to see.

A Cursory Look at My Experiences

Of the many firsthand incidents of protest marches I can recall, what readily come to mind are those I reported on as an intern journalist for a news agency in Ghana. These protests were vehement industrial strikes by diverse

groups of workers who demanded better conditions of service from their employers. I recall huge numbers of protestors wearing red shirts with red bands on hands and heads, holding placards of varied sizes with inscriptions on them, as they marched. I would like to take you with me as I explore some of the tools used in protest marches, with the hope that you'll be able to connect my examples to your own experiences.

Posters and Placards seem to be a common aspect of most protest marches and public demonstrations. Have you also observed this? Have you ever witnessed a protest march where there was no use of posters or placards? I have yet to see one for myself! If posters are that important for protests, then it seems useful to consider the role they play in these events. Who designs them? Who writes on them? Who determines what goes into the content of posters or placards?

To discuss the genre of posters, I shall be using an analytical theory called **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**. Illinois State University's Writing Program adapts this theory as a tool for examining literate activities and the ways in which thinking critically about the complex genres that we encounter in the world. We use ISU's version of CHAT to analyze all kinds

Writing Program Learning Outcomes

If you're interested, you can learn more about the ISU Writing Program Learning Outcomes at www.isuwriting.com. These are the learning outcomes I'm dealing with in this article:

- All About Genres: Exploring, Researching, and Analyzing Genres;
- Cultures and Communities: Culturally Responsive and Ethical Representations in Writing
- Cultural-historical activity theory: CHATting about Literate Activity (and Other Terms and Concepts).

of texts and literate activities through seven terms: production, distribution, socialization, representation, reception, ecology, and activity. Specifically, I'd like to use ISU's CHAT terms to explore activism events (protests, marches, demonstrations) as a **literate activity**. That is, these events (and the texts and tools used in creating and producing them) are historically developed. They involve changing systems of interaction between people, tools, environments, and cultures, and they include a wide range of social processes and texts uses to achieve particular goals. If activism events can be understood as literate

activities (people and tools and texts interacting over time) then the most appropriate tool to examine these systems and their genres is CHAT.

Don't get too worked up if the ISU CHAT terms looks strange to you; it is still strange to me even though I have been working with them for some time now. In addition to using CHAT, I shall be tackling the following three

learning outcomes² (see Callout 1) of the Writing Program that involve exploring genres, thinking about literate activity, and exploring CHAT as a tool for understanding texts in the world.

By the time we are through with the discussion, you might even become an advocate for CHAT, for sure, employing it in your everyday interactions, even when you are ordering chicken nuggets at Chick-fil-A in Normal, Illinois.

Is a Poster a Genre?

The first question I want to ask is whether it makes sense to say “posters” are a genre? What is a genre? Before entering the Writing Program at Illinois State University (ISU), I had always thought of the term genre regarding types of music (gospel, hi-life, hip hop, reggae, etc.) or types of books (drama, prose, fiction, non-fiction, comic, etc.). But now I know that genre is beyond just the categorization of text or music. My original definition of genre was based on my **antecedent knowledge**, which is basically the knowledge that one already possesses on a topic before encountering and reacting to a new situation or new knowledge. Your antecedent knowledge on any subject is important, no matter how little or insignificant you think it is. It serves as a guide or a springboard towards the acquisition of new knowledge, so don’t you ever undermine it! So, if genre is not what I thought it was, then what is it? According to Carolyn Miller, genre is a “typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations” (Genre as social action, 1984, p.157). Really? It is strange, isn’t it? I will explain this definition in the subsequent paragraph.



Figure 4: Example of a poster at a global climate change strike in Bavaria, Germany. (Unsplash. Markus Spiske/Public domain)

Let’s analyze this scenario: Universities often have events and resources that are specifically for students. In order to keep these resources for students alone, they need to find a way to decide who is from the school and who is an imposter. How would you contribute to solving this problem? Instinctively, I get the feeling that you would probably suggest that these

2. “Objectives” or “goals” in ordinary terms. The Writing Program has nine learning outcomes <http://isuwriting.com/learning-outcomes/>

folks demand the ID card of everyone who claims to be a student. That's right! The ID card would serve as a good identification tool. Now, linking it to our definition of a genre, the ID card now is the **typified response** to this recurring situation (identification problem). Then again, how would they distinguish fake ID cards from genuine ones? Every ID card has some recognizable features and standard conventions that most people can identify. Most ID cards have a photo/picture, the name of the bearer/holder, identification number, institution or organization which issues the card, barcodes, etc. Even though not all ID cards have all these conventions, most of them share these traits. These features or characteristics are what we call **genre conventions**. All genres are defined by conventions or features, which is why we can distinguish an ID card from a resume, or a memorandum from an essay.

Now that we have established our definition of genre, how do we justify that a poster used in a protest march qualifies as a genre? What recurring situation is it responding to? What are the features or conventions of a poster? When protestors embark on a march, they seek to either create awareness of an existing issue or provide remedial measures to address a challenge. How do they communicate any of these intentions? Do they go from door to door, room to room, person to person, whispering into people's ears what they have in mind? Definitely not! So now, the **recurring situation** is how to make their message readily available to everybody. How about if they write it on a poster or placard and carry it along as they protest or demonstrate? Will people be able to get their message without them shouting at the top of their voices or moving from door to door? Certainly! Then, of course, a poster is a genre because in such open spaces where protests are done, it's one of the most common typified responses to the recurring situation (information dissemination). If a poster is a genre, then it should have some conventions or features that distinguish it from an ID card or any other thing, which leads to our next step.

CHATing with Posters!

The use of posters and placards has become such an integral part of protest marches that it is hardly common to find a protest that doesn't use them. It has become so conventional that the absence of posters in any march would be strange. But how are posters made? Are there any standard conventions guiding how they are produced? This brings to mind the first term of CHAT that I would like to talk about: **production**. Production deals with the means through which a text is created. This includes both tools (say, using

a computer to produce a text vs. using a cell phone to produce a text) and practices (for example, the physical practices for using a computer vs. using a cell phone have some similarities, but also many differences) (ISU Writing Program). What tools does one need to produce a poster? Well, it depends on the type of poster one wants to create. The creativity in designing posters allows for **multimodal composition**, which is when a composition uses more than one mode of communication to achieve its intended purpose. Multimodal composition can include any combination of visual, audio, gestural, spatial, or alphabetic means of creating meaning. Each of these can be found at a protest, but visual and alphabetic modes are most common on protest posters. In addition, these artifacts are material compositions, in that they are created using all kind of materials, such as paper, cardboard, cloth, paint, markers, and wood.



Figure 5: Group of protesters during a women's march with signboards.



Figure 6: An example of protesters using multimodal signs/posters during a march in London, England. (Unsplash. Yeo Khee/Public domain)

These examples illustrate that the genre of protest posters can be produced in multiple modes. We see a combination of words (linguistic mode) and visuals (visual mode), each of which help communicate the message effectively. One would need different tools to produce each of the posters in the pictures. Figures 3 and 6 are examples of posters with typed, boldfaced inscriptions. In the **production** of this type of poster, one needs texts or a computer with a word processor, a printer which prints in black and red ink, a large sheet of paper, plywood, and a wooden handle. The maker of the poster determines which font type and size of the writings to use, whether it should be upper or lower cases, whether it should be bold or italicized, and whether it should be printed on an A4, A3, or A2 paper size. Figures 2 and 4, on the other hand, have inscriptions that are not typed; they are handwritten/drawn. The tools needed to produce these posters are colored markers and a piece of plywood or cardboard. The maker of the poster determines the kinds of colors to use, the drawings to use, whether the language should be formal or informal, etc. The question is: what accounts for the dynamics in the choice of whether the poster should be printed or handwritten? Is it to show simplicity or sophistication? Some people might think that when posters are handwritten, it tells of the passion and intimate connection the bearer has with the message on the poster. Another school of thought might argue that it shows simplicity and validates the message being communicated. It is less expensive and easy to generate. On the other hand, a typed inscription on a poster also may arguably indicate seriousness or professionalism, especially when the protestors are elites or important people in society. It is quick to generate and sometimes more durable.

All these dynamics show the multifaceted conventions of posters used in protests. It shows the multimodal composition feature of posters. A single poster can be comprised of a picture, written texts, and visual arts. When language intercourses with arts, a tremendous impact is made. The presence of each of these modes creates its own effect on the poster and elicits diverse responses or reactions from people who view it. Some people are moved more by visual modes than linguistic modes while others prefer a combination. Regardless of the choices one makes about the poster—whether typed, handwritten, drawn, or painted—the writings or message should be clear to readers or passersby. However, depending on the audience and situation, “clarity” might require the use of a wide range of different materials, visuals, languages, or stylistic choices.

After determining the tools for producing the poster, another term of CHAT that is worth mentioning is **distribution**. Distribution refers to the means through which a text is shared or disseminated to different people and places. It involves the consideration of where texts go and who might

take them up. It also considers the tools and methods that can be used to distribute text, and how distribution can sometimes move beyond the original purposes intended by the author(s). When you think about distribution, think about how you would get a message across to different people. Would you send it via mail, phone, public address system, notice board, or face-to-face? During protests, people get to see posters primarily because they are either participants of the protest or they are passersby. Protestors sometimes share mini-posters, stickers, brochures, t-shirts, wristbands, handouts, written papers, etc. so that passersby can have time to read their messages to get more information. Some people decorate their vehicles, bags, books, etc. with posters and stickers from protests as a means of distribution. At other times, people get to see the posters only when they are captured on video or photos and uploaded to social media platforms. All these are avenues of distributing the text/poster to a wide range of audiences.

In “Just CHATting,” Dr. Joyce Walker explains that when people engage with texts/posters, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices. To consider these issues, the CHAT terms, reception, representation and socialization are useful, and I’ve paraphrased Dr. Walker’s definitions from her article below:

- **Reception** is not just who will read the text (in our case the posters). It also takes into account the ways people might use or repurpose a text. Reception is how the audience, whether an intended or unintended audience, reacts and responds to an activity. Their reception can influence the distribution, which is how the piece is taken up and shared with others.
- **Representation** (one of the most important ISU CHAT terms) highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this.
- **Socialization** involves both reception and representation and describes how interactions between people can affect the way a text is produced, digested, understood, and used in the world.

These concepts can help us to ask questions about protest posters (as a genre) and help people communicate with one another. We might ask questions such as the following:

- Do all protest posters have a “call to action”?
- How do people interact with posters during protest marches?

- What discussions (if any) do these posters make people have? Do passersby of the protest have positive or negative impressions of its relevance and how they might contribute?
- What kinds of ongoing change or discussion might these posters encourage? What kind of “life” might they have beyond the protest event (such as when a photograph of a poster is reported in the news or shared on a social media site?)

Before people embark on a protest, they think or plan about their purpose or theme, their target audience, the routes to use, the kind of posters to use, the writings or paintings to use in the posters, and other considerations (representation). One example of how protesters conceptualize their posters to try to make them more effective texts includes another ISU Writing Program concept: **Translingualism**. In certain situations, poster content can be written in multiple languages within one protest march in order to reach diverse people with multiple language backgrounds. Decisions that the author of a protest sign might need to make include the languages that should be used (English, French, Akan, etc.), whether to make the message more formal or informal, whether to use slang or pop-culture references, the use of humor, and a whole range of other choices. Authors of a protest poster might think about: *For whom am I writing? How much jargon should I use? Should I use civil or uncivil language? Are there restrictions to who can access it? Is there a standardized format of poster I should use? Should it be online, printed, or handwritten? Does our choice of theme, messages, or posters represent the diversity of protestors or passersby? Which neighborhood would serve our purpose better?* Some neighborhoods have zero tolerance for vulgarity or inappropriate language, so definitely posters that show explicit vulgarity might not be a good choice for such a neighborhood. At the planning stage, all these can be considered.

Have you ever seen a post on Facebook or any social media platform, liked it, and forwarded it to friends because you found it relevant to be shared? Your reaction or response to such posts shows how the contents of the post resonate with you (reception). Sometimes, it is not only about the content, but the conciseness and purposefulness of the post that appeal to us most. Some protests require people to sign petitions to show their support or contribute money if it is a funding protest, etc. Sometimes, onlookers cheer protestors on; other times they hoot or boo at them to show their disagreement. People’s reception to posters can be based on features of the genre, such as how purposeful and informational it is, how clear the message is, how organized and concise it is, the politeness of the contents, the rich display and design, etc. It can also be based on the antecedent knowledge a viewer/reader brings to the situation. Reception can be both positive and negative.

There are also physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing (Walker). This constitutes **ecology**, which is another ISU CHAT term I want to talk about. Bad weather can thwart the plans of protestors. Rain can destroy the posters that protestors have made for a protest. Paper accessibility, non-availability of funds for printing, dysfunctional printers, road blocks, language barriers, court orders and injunctions, overwhelming or underwhelming turnout of protestors, and other natural phenomena can ruin protests. In situations where protests are unauthorized, security services can meddle in the activities of protestors. In many regions where peaceful protests have turned into violent ones, police have sprayed tear gas and water cannons on protestors, sometimes injuring many. These physical, biological, and environmental forces are part of the ecology of the protest activity system.

The last ISU CHAT term I want to discuss in relation to the creation of posters for protest marches is activity. **Activity** is a term that encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create a text (writing, drawing, walking across the hall to ask someone else what they think, surveying, getting peer review, etc.), and it tends to interrelate and overlap with all of the other concepts that ISU's Writing Program uses to talk about CHAT. Activity describes the process of how genres are produced, and it involves everything that goes into creating or using writing in any form. To consider how activity is part of the genre of protest posters, we might consider the activities a protestor engages in. We can think about gathering information, soliciting funding, planning a date, time, and venue for the protest, brainstorming a theme, hashtag or message for the protest, navigating through the kinds of posters to use, designing and printing posters, providing ambulances, mobilizing protestors from different locations, securing authorization to protest from authorities, and engaging the media to cover the protest. All these are activities within the activity system.

How Much Do You Love CHAT Now? Should I Set a Date for Your Nuptials?

We use CHAT to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world. In addition to providing a way to think through the range of activities, genres and choices related to any literate activity, we can use it to think about how systems of activity are created and adapted using the genres, and tools people use to engage in those activities. We might use CHAT to help us create an effective protest poster or organize a demonstration. But we might also use it to help us understand how the genres used by activists might need to evolve or change to meet new environments and goals.

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