

GRASSROOTS WRITING RESEARCH JOURNAL

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From the Editors

“It is very consoling to me that you consider me a writer because every time I sit down with a pen in my hand, I have to persuade myself (and others) of this fact.”

—James Joyce, 1920¹

In this third issue of *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (GWRJ), the first spring issue ever published, we, like James Joyce, explore our own attitudes towards being writers. Regardless of expertise, most writers struggle with writing and doubt their own capabilities, especially when adjusting to new writing situations. But approaching new situations with genre theory in mind can provide writers with more confidence. The articles in this issue thus demonstrate how all kinds of writers—a high school student, undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty—use genre studies in a variety of situations, from Japanese comics to annotated bibliographies to memoirs, to gain new confidence as writers. In addition, the articles investigate writing activities such as research practices, grammar rules, usability concerns, and more. Anyone who has felt the struggle of writing and wants to gain a deeper understanding of this struggle can appreciate the articles in this issue.

To begin, **Shane Lucas** describes the rewarding but often frustrating process of learning to compose a manga in “Things That School Couldn’t Teach Me: Writing a Kick-Ass Manga,” while **Amy Hicks** describes a “less-than-successful” experience working with memoir using Eileen Weidbrauk’s GWRJ article “Making Memoir” as a guide. **Niall Nance-Carroll** narrates his experience learning the constraints of the poetic form of the sestina in “Working with a Net: How Constraints Can Enable Writing,” while in “The Genre of Reviews: You Want Me To Do What?!?,” **Allie Coursey** learns about writing in the genre of the review.

Kristi McDuffie, **Angela Gentile**, and **Alyssa Shapiro** all work with genres that are used in school settings. **McDuffie’s** article “Swimming in Literary Analysis” describes feeling like a fish out of water when learning a new school genre; **Gentile** explains how learning about and then utilizing annotated bibliographies helps her research practices in “Annotated Bibliographies for Dummies”; and **Shapiro** describes her investigation into the field of biology and its genres of writing in “Learning About the Genres of Biology.”

There are also several articles that address specific aspects of writing. In “Breaking Down Grammatical Snobbery: What Comedian Stephen Fry Can Teach Us about Language Flexibility in Genres,” **Autumn Jackson** discusses Stephen Fry’s ideas about grammatical prescription and considers how grammatical rules may or may not be useful in certain genres. In his article, “Writing for Use: Intersections between Genre and Usability,” **Rob Koehler** considers the concept of “usability” (a term that comes from technical communication) and connects it to genre study. Meanwhile, **Emily Johnston** navigates the peer workshop in “Playing Well with Others: Demystifying the Workshop Process.”

Next, there are three texts that we have reprinted from past *Grassroots* journals. The first is “Reading Visual Texts: A Bullet for Your Arsenal,” in which **Susana Rodriguez** introduces us to visual rhetoric as it appears around our campus and in our lives. **Jamison Lee**, in “Genre Studies, Grice, and Burlesque,” investigates how Grice’s maxims of politeness can be subverted for humor. In “Researching One in Six Million,” **Hilary Selznick** researches her grandmother’s history as a Holocaust survivor.

The GWRJ will continue to publish an issue twice a year. To guide authors in crafting articles, the GWRJ editors are happy to provide “Publishing with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*” as the final article in this issue. This article offers information on the mission, style, and submission guidelines for the journal that we hope will help future authors also explore what it means to feel like a writer.

Endnotes

1. From a letter that James Joyce wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver. Found in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, edited by Richard Ellmann, New York: Viking Press, 1975, p. 248.

Things That School Couldn't Teach Me: Writing a Kick-Ass Manga

Shane T. Lucas

Shane T. Lucas discusses his process for writing a Manga after finding out that his school writing has not prepared him to write one. After reading Manga, watching anime, and using his art background, Shane begins to discover what he needs to do to write his own.

Manga, the Japanese word for comic, is a form of writing that I became interested in when I was in 6th grade. Reading was really not my thing, and I couldn't seem to find anything I liked reading until a friend turned me on to Manga. I think I was drawn to these comics because of the artwork. I have been drawing and creating my own stories through pictures most of my life, and Manga gave me something to read that brought both artwork and story together in the same book, not to mention the fact that reading right to left rather than left to right is pretty cool. After tearing through Manga series after Manga series, I decided to attempt to create my own. I have drawn several Manga and Anime style characters in the past, creating life stories for each, but I had never attempted to write an entire book. I decided that trying to do this would be difficult. But I knew I would learn a lot if I did it, and it would help me with my future goal: attending art school in order to become a cartoon and Anime artist.

Before I could begin writing my own Manga, I sat down to think about everything I knew about them. My list was pretty long. I kept coming back to the idea of having pictures being the main focus of telling the story in a

Manga with the words playing a second role. In Manga, most of the story's action is told through the artwork. On some pages, it is possible to avoid words and still get the story being told. The pictures usually show a fight scene, which would not have as much talking. Or during a flashback, there might be one or two words, but the art goes into much more detail in order to show something dramatic like the death of someone important. The words seem to focus on dialogue between characters, the thoughts of a character or the sounds being created in the action, like the swishing sound of a sword. I knew that I would have to find some way to move the story forward using both the art and the words in a way that made sense. I felt confident about knowing what a Manga was about, but this could be difficult.

From my list about Manga I also knew that I would have to move the frames of art in such a way that they would move right to left across and down the page. The first time I tried to read *Naruto*, I opened it like a normal book. There was a page that said you are reading this the wrong way, and it showed you an example page with numbered frames so you knew how to read the book. If you begin reading a Manga and you don't follow the frames the right way, the story won't make sense. Although I would be writing in English and the sentences would be moving left to right, I had to place the dialogue bubbles moving right to left. This seems odd when you think about it: I would be writing left to right in the dialogue bubbles since I am writing in English, but placing the frames and movement of the story from right to left like a traditional Manga.

The last big thing from my first list was the fact that even though Manga takes away a bit of your own imagination as a reader since the story is shown in pictures, most Manga I have read still leave some things out and this lets you imagine some of the story on your own. This would probably be the hardest thing to create in my own Manga. For example, in *Deathnote*, when something important is going to happen, like one of the characters dying, the author will leave you hanging. You eventually find out what happens in the next volume through a flashback, but it is not always revealed all the way. What should I show and not show to the reader? If I show everything up front, then the series is pretty much screwed. No one would want to read the rest of the series. But if I don't foreshadow enough, then the series will be dull, and the reader would become bored as hell.

After I created my initial "what I know" list, I had to decide what type of Manga I wanted to write. Manga come in all sorts of themes. They can have romance stories, ninja-based stories, magic-based stories, vampire stories, etc. The choices seem almost endless. Although I read a lot of traditional Manga with science-fiction or fantasy storylines, I didn't really want to go this route. It would have been easier to do this though, since I have the Manga

series *Bleach*, *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball Z* and *Full Metal Alchemist* sitting on a shelf in my room—all traditional science fiction and fantasy Manga. These seemed pretty old school to me, and I wanted to aim for something different.

I had recently been watching Anime shows that were based on a more realistic storyline, with a bit of the impossible thrown in. These Manga seemed more like James Bond, spy, double agent, covert operation stories. This was the type of Manga I decided to write. I needed to read more Manga like this in order to make sure I was understanding the types of storylines they included. A trip to Borders in order to buy copies of *Gunslinger Girl* and *Golgo 13*—two great examples of covert operation stories—was a bust. They are both out of print according to the bookstore, so I decided to watch the Anime versions of both through an on-line Manga site for free Anime. I know that this is not the same kind of text as the written Manga, but at least it would give me a way of knowing the storylines, themes, problems and types of characters found in this type of Manga. However, the Anime version is often not written by the original author, so the story can change. There are also no frames in Anime, so the action is all one movement, but in the Manga, frames move the story and some actions are left out. For example, in a Manga, a character's arm movement would be shown with three arms drawn in one frame, and each arm gets lighter. This implies movement.

I spent four days watching episode after episode of both *Gunslinger Girl* and *Golgo 13* and taking notes. I noted the basic attitudes of the characters and how both stories opened. I also noted how characters acted in different situations.

I felt ready to begin my Manga, which is titled *Hitman*. Before I began the actual page layouts, artwork and writing, I sat down to create a theme and story for *Hitman*. I wanted this Manga to be centered on a teenage boy in high school from a family of CIA assassins. When the main character arrives home from school one day, he discovers his entire family has been murdered by four Mafia groups who have been the victims of CIA operations. I wanted *Hitman* to include a double life of problems for the main character, both his life as an assassin problems and his life as a teenager in high school problems.



Figure 1: Sample Manga

After I had a central theme, I began designing my main character. I wrote down the characteristics I wanted him to have—his attitude, personality, features. From this list, I drew my first draft and from this drawing, I created his name: Kaoru Yuki Cloud. I then began a list of other characters, their traits and names, and began rough drawings for each. This was a long process, but I felt that without themes, problems, characters, storylines and settings laid out, I wouldn't be able to begin the actual writing of *Hitman*. The work so far pretty much gives me the entire layout in a big picture, but not in great detail.

It was time to sit down with my sketchbook and pencils and lay out the first page. I had with me several other Manga, like *Bleach* and *Full Metal Alchemist*, to use as references for panel layouts, picture size, showing emotion, and text layout. This part was much more difficult than I thought it would be. Two problems kept occurring: trying to perfect my artwork and dealing with backstory for the characters and storyline.



Figure 2: Kaoru Yuki Cloud Character Sketch

The artwork issue is something that is not new for me. Because I want to be an artist, I obsess over my artwork and this often gets in the way of my drafting a piece of art. I want it perfect the first time. After struggling with the art aspect of the initial page, I decided to rough sketch the first few pages, sometimes using stick figures in order to get a feel for the art layout. I could then go back to a new page in the sketchbook and do proper drawings. Sketching the art or the layout made me think about new ideas or new problems, which made me have to go back and change parts of the Manga.

I am still stuck on backstory and plot. I have never been taught how to construct a plot or deal with written storytelling. We talk about plot with short stories in school and we have to pick out the pieces from someone else's story, but writing one of your own is so different than recognizing one. When you are the author you have to think about what you want, what the reader wants and if what the reader wants can still go along with my thoughts. I don't consider myself a good story writer, but a good story teller. I am Dyslexic, and physically composing is very difficult. Spelling, grammar and all that jazz are huge problems for me. If I could have talked out my entire *Hitman* Volume I and drawn it at the same time, this would have been so

much easier. But how fast to move through the story, what to leave out, and how to make characters sound different when they talk to each other, are much harder than I thought.

At this point, I have two pages of my Manga laid out and written, but I'm not sure how to move ahead without the tools for writing a story. I know what it has to have, and I know where I want it to go, but I don't know how to get there. None of the writing I do in school has prepared me for writing *Hitman*. We write essays or we write endings to short stories. We never come up with entire stories of our own. I've never had to write more than five paragraphs in school, but I need to write anywhere from 130 to 140 pages to complete a Manga. I also need to find some way of teaching myself how to write effective plots, where to include backstory, and how to make the text and the art work together. I don't feel like I can move forward without this knowledge. I can read a million more Manga, but I don't think this will help. I asked my mom if there was a college class on writing plot I could take, but I don't think that is an option for a high school freshman.

I'm not going to give up, though. I might have to sit down and write the entire *Hitman* story as a regular short story first and then pull the pieces out to use in the Manga version. I don't know if this will work, but it's worth a shot.



Shane T. Lucas is a high school freshman who believes the only tests given in school should challenge students' knowledge of Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix lyrics. In his spare time he creates art, researches Parkour, and hangs with his friends. He plans to attend the School of Visual Arts in New York City when he escapes high school.

(Re)Making Memoir: A Story of Small Victories and Even Bigger Failures

Amy Hicks

In this article, Amy Hicks explains the intricacies of and heartache associated with revisiting a genre of writing, the memoir, that she wrote (and abandoned midway through) years ago. She references Eileen Weidbrauk's "Making Memoir" during her quest to understand what went wrong when she attempted to compose a memoir, and then she looks to other published texts in this genre and online resources in order to identify generic conventions. But she doesn't stop there. Amy (valiantly) attempts to understand not only the features of the genre, but also how these traits "work" in the larger narrative and how they inform the world-building quality of memoir.

WARNING: This is not a story of girl meets memoir, girl and memoir fall in love, and the two of them move into a house with a white picket fence and live happily ever after. It's more like a story of girl meets memoir on a blind date; girl and memoir have differing opinions about politics, religion, and appropriate table manners; and they part with empty promises, such as "I'll text you" and "we should really do this again."

Tucked away in the deepest, darkest recesses of my computer's saved document folders, along with notes from my sophomore history class and a junior level poetry course, is my one and only attempt to write a memoir. I never sent these documents to my recycle bin because of a plaguing fear that I might need these documents again in order to recall certain historical events or recite a stanza from a T.S. Eliot poem as cocktail party tricks. But my attempt to write a memoir remains tucked away for a different reason: it's a story about a moment in my life that is not especially momentous, but memorable nonetheless. In my mind, this moment exemplifies love, courage, perseverance—the stuff "good" stories are made of. This story (about how my dear, sweet mother told a particularly odious referee to take a hike after

making my brother cry during a flag football game) is one that still comes up around the dinner table at home, one that still makes me laugh when it's retold. Dinner table tales typically sound a lot better, well, around the dinner table than after writing them down. Two paragraphs into "Pom-Pom" and I quickly realized that the title was the only aspect of my story that I actually liked. The details were clumsy, and the narrative's trajectory was stuck at point A, with no indication that the plot would move forward to point B, much less C, D, or E. I just couldn't get the story to communicate the elements of love, courage, and perseverance I mentioned above, even though I can call these things to mind through an oral recollection. Needless to say, my first stab at memoir left me frustrated. I was so frustrated that I tucked it away in my saved files, and the story has gathered (digital) dust for years.

I had failed at writing memoir. Miserably.

<Deep cleansing breath> But I think I'm ready to give it another try, or at the very least, to try and figure out what went so horribly, horribly wrong. After reading Eileen Wiedbrauk's "Making Memoir" in *The ISU Writing Research Annual* (2010), I realized that maybe I *could* gain a better understanding of this genre. Wiedbrauk explains the various criteria for memoir (which I will reference throughout this article), and this criteria should be able to help me successfully revisit "Pom-Pom." I also did some basic Google searches about memoir writing dos and don'ts so I can get an even better idea of what the conventions/features of this genre are and if they match up with what Wiedbrauk identifies in her article. And I've read some published memoirs, like Koren Zailckas's *Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood* and James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, and can use them as points of reference or examples of how the genre "works." (My assumption is that these memoirs have to be good examples, or they wouldn't be published and so widely read. I could be wrong about this, but nevertheless, it won't hurt to look at these as sample texts.) I am officially armed and ready.¹

First things first. I finished reading Wiedbrauk's article, and now I definitely know that a memoir should be a story about an aspect of my life or an event in my life. As Wiedbrauk explains, memoir centers on the idea that something has happened, some sort of *action* is described by recording a story about *an event*. Ok. I think I've got that covered: I've attempted to write about what I mentioned above—how my mom blessed out (which is the Southern equivalent to cussing out) the referee at a flag football game. I can consider that the ultimate *action* that occurred at a *specific event*, in this case, a flag football game. Check!

But Wiedbrauk also states that this story about an event, in which some sort of action occurs, informs the idea that writing memoir is all

about “narrating,” or “describing, building the world in words” (46). That’s intimidating...especially since I typically write in genres that do not require any sort of world-building through the creative use of language, like seminar papers, a tricky academic genre that doesn’t privilege the skillful brandishing of storytelling techniques. I can also write text messages, notes for class, or grocery lists, but none of these genres requires an imaginative narrative. I can write a darn good email too, asking a friend if I can have her recipe for banana bread. But writing a story about how I asked a friend for her recipe for banana bread is like asking me to juggle machetes while playing “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore” on the kazoo. Scary. Not to mention, next to impossible. Writing a story about *anything* requires skills that I might not have, juggling and kazoo playing included.

I’m running into even more trouble. Wiedbrauk mentions that memoir isn’t “the kind of writing that lends itself to a cheesy summation in the final line such as *it was one of the most wonderful days of my life* or *I’ve learned so much from my kitten, my kitten and I have learned so much from each other*” (46-7). Take a look at my first sentence the first time I wrote about my mother versus the referee:

Growing up, I always admired my mother: _____

Super cheesy, warm-and-snuggly sentence

Wiedbrauk mentions that including a “cheesy summation” in a memoir is a definite no-no. Mine is at the beginning, which is probably much worse than being at the end! I can just imagine someone picking up my memoir and thinking, “Why should *I* care about why this person admires her mother?”

So, how do I even begin to revise my story? What does a good opening line look like? How do I start when I know that, in the end, I want the focus to be on my mother and how wonderful she is? Should I say something about her first? Should I begin with something about myself? And let’s not forget this key question: How do I get the reader to actually care about what I’m writing about and want to read on?

I think the way to figure out how to begin is by looking at example first lines and discover not only what these opening sentences say, but also what they do. Wiedbrauk’s example opens with “*My first car was a 1986 maroon Dodge Dynasty that had rolled off the production line back when I was still in diapers*” (49). This sentence says what Wiedbrauk’s car looks like, but it also gives us a reference point so we can understand how old the car is in relationship to her. And another thing this sentence does is give the readers specific, descriptive details—what I understand to be an aspect of the world-building nature of narration. So, I know that an opening line should give the readers details that they can hold onto, details that evoke specific images in their minds.

Looking closely at Wiedbrauk's first sentence was really helpful, but I'd like to look at more examples just to see if I understand how opening lines in a memoir work and how they function to draw readers in. In Zailckas's *Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood*, the first line is "This is the kind of night that leaves a mark" (1). Wait a minute! This sentence has no explicit details about the night itself, what kind of mark might be left by this night, nothing. It's a line stripped of detail. It's not really saying much...but maybe that's the point. What this line might be doing is acting as a slightly ambiguous opening statement meant to engage readers, so that they are left asking, "What do you mean? What's happened here?" Leaving the readers with questions may be a strategic way to engage them, to prompt them to read on.

Instead of marking the example from Zailckas's text as an X on the memoir criteria checklist, perhaps I should look at another example, this one from Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*.² Frey writes, "I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin." What is this first sentence saying? Well, we, as readers, know that Frey has been asleep, he wakes up hearing an airplane engine, and he feels some unknown warm substance dripping down his chin. What this opening line is saying is pretty straightforward, but what it's doing is an entirely different matter. There's some detail here, although not extremely evocative, but like Zailckas's first sentence, we know that something has happened to Frey. This sentence, again, acts as a way to draw readers in and prompts them to ask, "What in God's name is on his face? Why is he on an airplane with grossness on his face?"

The opening lines that I've examined thus far show me that there are no hard-and-fast rules to beginning a memoir, except it seems that they all work to grab the reader's attention. But all three reaffirm my belief that my first sentence is not working. But maybe there's something salvageable in my introductory paragraph. Let's see:

I know this first sentence doesn't work, but I'll keep it around for now.

There are some details here, like how my Mama is a Southern Belle. That's good, right? Yay?

Growing up, I always admired my mother. I still do. She's what I would call a true Southern Belle. She taught me that "pee" was a dirty word that ladies don't say, you must look your very best at all times because lord knows who you'll run into at Wal-Mart, and any particularly nasty comment about someone could be softened with a sweetly uttered "bless your heart." Despite all of her consideration of appearances, the image of her shaking a green and white pom-pom to emphasize each impassioned word she yelled at a flag football referee is ingrained in my mind.

Ignoring my problematic opening sentence, I can see that I'm easing my readers into my memoir and don't really get to the point, or thesis, until the

end of the first paragraph. This last sentence establishes that my mother acted completely out of character on this particular day, and since this image of her “is ingrained in my mind,” it must have been memorable, affecting me in some poignant way.

Looking again at the “moves” I’m making in the first paragraph, it seems like I’m following the “ramping up method,” as described by Wiedbrauk (53). She explains that this method of writing an introduction involves a certain “building up,” or providing the reader with some general statements, followed by a thesis-like statement at the end of the paragraph (53). This seems to be what I’ve done above, even though I tried to provide more specific details. Well, that’s not so bad, is it? I followed a method, and I stated a main point. Check? The problem is that the “ramping up” method relies heavily on the conventions of school-based narrative genres, such as having a clear thesis statement, instead of a focus.

Great. I am now reminded *again* of how important it is to world-build with words, to narrate, to describe this event vividly so that the reader is swept away into flag-football-game-is-interrupted-by-mother-screaming-leaving-her-daughter-scratching-her-head-in-dismay land. It all seems to come back to that idea: storytelling. Not only does Wiedbrauk stress that over and over *and over* again, but the various (seemingly credible) sources on the Internet also emphasize this integral component to writing a successful memoir.

I’ve got enough fire in me (courtesy of the headstrong, dare I say bullheaded, gene passed along from mother to daughter) to not give up completely. I should probably try to emulate the “diving right in” method, which Weibrauk claims is more “action driven” (53). That sounds like something I want to do with my memoir because another reason my original introduction fails is that the story is not propelled into action. Remember my saccharine sweet “I admire my mother” blah de blah blah? Those sentences, while nicely described in adequate detail, weren’t sufficiently setting my memoir in motion. Reading them leaves the reader with probably little to no interest in wanting to read on, to figure out why I feel that way. My earlier memoir attempt is not a story—it’s a statement of ideas or thoughts. What can I do to remedy this problem and tell a story with words? Weidbrauk gives two examples of how to “dive in”: “*My grandfather put the keys in my hand and I couldn’t believe it: my own car*” and “*He had a coarse, gritty laugh that sounds like a combination of being an old man and a smoker*” (53). The examples

show a way to begin a memoir with action. So, maybe my first sentence could look like this:

Something is actually happening in my memoir!

I never saw my mother stomp onto the field, but when I turned around, there she was amidst a mass of sixth grade boys in their football uniforms. Face-to-face with the referee, both of them red faced and screaming. My mother, the genteel Southern Belle, shaking a green and white pom-pom to emphasize each word she pushed out through tightened lips painted her signature deep red.

Phew. I think that's better, at least according to the "diving right in" method. In these first three sentences, I see that there are things going on: stomping, moving, standing, and yelling. It's starting to sound like a story, one that might actually draw readers in and compel them to continue reading.

Does this opening really work though? This revision follows the criteria established in "Making Memoir." Action. Check! Detail. Check! But even though I seem to be following the criteria, it's still not perfect. It seems like I begin with the real heart of the story, the ultimate action. I feel like I'm delivering a punch line without setting up the joke. I'm three sentences into the memoir and I'm already revealing the climactic moment of my tale.

How do I continue my story after I've seemingly already gotten to the real "meat" of the event in the first few sentences? Is this something I can fix? Well, I think so. Maybe fixing it means that I should rethink what my memoir will ultimately accomplish. Maybe what my story is really about is not just what actually happened on that fateful fall day, but also the results of that day. My mother's actions at that flag football game allowed me to fully understand what was beneath that genteel exterior: a strong, resilient, multifaceted Mama. I was able to see her as an actual person, not just my mother. I was just a kid, but I saw this clearly when she acted in a way that I thought was so out of character for her. I learned that this was just part of her, this impassioned outburst, this stomping, yelling, shaking a pom-pom Mama. That's the real story, and I'm not sure if I can convey that in a way that other people would care to read about. Because the way I told you the "real" story just now is definitely kind of mushy-gushy and perhaps a bit cheesy.

So, how do I negotiate between the story I want to tell, and how am I supposed to tell this story according to memoir conventions? I'm not sure I have the answer for that. And it's become clear to me that knowing the criteria of memoir is not the same thing as knowing how to follow that criteria. I can read Wiedbrauk's article for the umpteenth time, keep doing Google searches, and read more examples, but I don't know if I can

create an effective, successful memoir. I feel like I can come to terms with the fact that I'm not the best storyteller, though. I can freely admit that I don't know if I even *want* to be the best storyteller. I'd almost rather stick to dinner table tales.

But I think it's pretty obvious that my first and second attempts at (re) making memoir will not be lost in the black hole of my computer's document folders. (You're reading this, right?)

Endnotes

1. Perhaps I'm making my research process seem a bit too simple. Being able to analyze genre—and knowing where to begin—takes practice and lots of it.
2. I know, I know. *A Million Little Pieces* is packed full of lies. Oprah made sure to let the entire nation know this, but Frey still wrote a *story* about himself, whether it's true or not. I suppose readers expect a memoir to be a true reflection of events in someone's life, and I think we might even consider the “truth factor” as a convention of the genre. And for Frey, there were some consequences for deviating from this feature. God forbid anyone feel the wrath of Oprah.

Works Cited

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Amy Hicks is a doctoral student specializing in children's literature at Illinois State University. Her idea of a perfect evening is sitting on her sofa watching old musicals while eating cookies. Due to her unwavering dedication to her studies and teaching, Amy rarely gets to enjoy such an evening. But she always finds time to eat cookies.

Writing for Use: Intersections Between Genre and Usability

Rob Koehler

This article tackles usability—a very big idea—in a small amount of space. And, because I don't believe in doing things in a small way, this article also takes up the idea of how genre and usability, when thought about together, can help us write more effectively.

Let's start with a few scenarios: mentally put a check next to the situations that apply to you:

- ✓ Have you ever been looking for something in a store and not been sure where to go? For example, when you want a filter for a water pitcher, you can't really be sure where to go in Wal-Mart to find what you want. Sure, Wal-Mart has signs up that tell you where stuff is in the store, but they really aren't very specific, so it's difficult to know where to find one item in the store when it's all you need.
- ✓ Have you ever been so mad at a piece of technology that you thought about throwing it out the window? Maybe your phone won't connect to the internet no matter what you do. You've tried what they showed you at the phone store, but that isn't making anything happen. Now, you can't check the score for the game, and you don't know another option for fixing your problem.
- ✓ Have you ever had to fill out a tax form? Not only are you giving your hard earned money to the government because they've ordered you to, but you

also have to fill out this form with a whole bunch of stuff like Interest, Benefits, and other categories that don't apply to you. And even worse, because you don't receive money in many of the categories on the form, you don't really understand what most of the stuff on the form is even for.

- ✓ Have you ever been on a website looking for some specific information and been completely unable to find it? For example, you're on Amazon or eBay or Half, and you're searching for a product that you don't know the name of. You know that it slices, it dices, it does whatever, but you can't remember what the stupid thing is called. Amazon may have every product under the sun, but because they do, you better know the name of what you want if you want to find it in less than 20 minutes.

All of the situations I describe above are examples of breakdown in *usability*. To quote the experts, “[U]sability refers to how well users can learn and use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process.”¹ A product can be just about anything that a person creates, from a brick to a supercomputer. The examples of products I gave above were fairly diverse: a store, a phone, a form, and a website. But usability also applies to products like cars, soda machines, pencils, chairs, and just about any other stuff made by human beings. Usability is important because when products aren't usable, people have problems like those I described above.

WHAT ABOUT GOOGLE?

For a great example of a usability test, check out this video about when Google was first launching its site and asking people to come try it out.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AH-Vd6uNUU>

Can you imagine a Google Homepage that wasn't just a plain white screen?

In fact, usability is so important that most corporations spend a significant amount of time doing usability testing before they release a product or publish a website. Usability testing sounds a bit scary, and it can be quite complicated, but the basics are simple. Usability engineers will bring people in to use the product; in usability lingo, that person is called a user. The engineers sometimes ask the user to do a set of tasks that can take anywhere from ten minutes to an entire day, or they may also just observe the user as he/she figures out the product and begins to use it. The usability engineers record the person's experience and then interview the person to discover how he/she felt about using the product. This process can go on for a few weeks or months as the usability engineers discover problems with the product as people use it. In general, what the usability engineers discover gets relayed to the other people developing and maintaining the product, who then try to fix the problems the usability engineers found.

At this point, you're probably wondering why I'm talking so much about this concept when I'm supposed to be talking about writing. Well, if you haven't guessed yet, this article is about applying usability ideas to writing. It may seem a bit strange right now, but usability is one way to help us write in new situations that can sometimes be very difficult. However, to make the connection between writing and usability clearer, we first need to discuss genre.

A genre is, to quote Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin, “a dynamic rhetorical [form] that develop[s] from responses to recurrent situations and serve[s] to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning.”² This definition is a bit heavy, but if we unpack it piece by piece, the connection between genre and usability becomes clearer. The first crucial word in the definition is form, used here in the same sense as you would use the term “the human form” to talk about the body. In essence, genres give a shape to information and ideas in the same way we say that the human body gives a shape to our minds. But where do genres come from; why do these shapes exist? The next part of the definition explains that genres “develop from responses to recurrent situations.” A recurring situation is one that happens over and over again. Thus, genres, as forms for information and ideas, develop as the same need for communication occurs over and over again. As the same situations occur over and over again, a genre develops and changes in response; for example, go to the website www.archive.org and use the Wayback Machine to check out the history of a particular website (I'd suggest the *New York Times* at nytimes.com). Observe how the layout of the page, the information shown, and the placement of menus and pictures stays the same or changes over time. What you are seeing is how the genre of the newspaper website changes as readers interact with the genre and give feedback about what they like and don't like. The website changes as readers demand change, but the website also retains a recognizable structure that ensures it remains somewhat familiar to readers. Thus, as the definition of genre above notes, the newspaper website genre “stabilize[s] experience and give[s] it meaning and coherence” as it changes, yet remains the same, according to the needs of the people reading and writing the genre.

Genres then are forms of organizing and stabilizing information for readers and writers that change as readers and writers *use* them. The key word in that sentence is *use* because it's at the point of *use* by both writers and readers that usability can be helpful in improving our writing.

So, what does it look like if you start thinking like a usability engineer when you write? Well, below I give some ideas for applying usability in writing with some examples of how I've used these ideas in my writing.

| Usability Test | Example |
|---|---|
| <p>Think about the person who will ultimately make use of the genre. This seems obvious and basic, but often we forget about the user when we begin writing, whether in a new or familiar genre. The process of writing can be overwhelming, especially when working in a new genre, and we can get so caught up in our own concerns that we forget about the person who will ultimately be putting the writing to use.</p> | <p>I've spent quite a bit of time writing help documents for new software users. When I started writing instructions, I would write numbered lists of steps that the users needed to follow in order to complete the task. However, as I thought about users trying to follow my directions, I realized that I wasn't really helping them because I was giving them lists of steps without any other explanation or illustration. So, I started including brief explanations of what each help document was supposed to help users do and giving explanations of commonly used terms; I also started inserting screenshots that showed the different screens and where to click so that users could become familiar with the software more quickly. Because I started to think about how the user would <i>use</i> the writing I was doing, I was able to see problems and fix them. While I may not have solved every problem with my help documentation, I did catch some of the biggest ones before people started using my writing.</p> |
| <p>Take the writing to a person who reads, writes, or edits the genre regularly. No one knows more about what features make a specific genre usable than a person who's <i>using</i> that genre all of the time. Have the person read the text. When he/she is done reading, ask him/her whether the text matches up with the genre expectations that he/she has. The feedback from expert users will be beneficial because they know what makes that genre usable.</p> | <p>At my current job, I spend a lot of time sitting in on and taking notes for meetings. Before this job, I'd never had to take meeting notes before, and I was unsure whether the notes would be useful to the people participating in the meetings. To make sure they were useful, I went to one of my bosses and asked her to go over my notes with me. My boss has experience taking notes and referring back to notes taken by someone else after a meeting; thus, she's familiar with how meeting notes gets used. As we went through the notes, she was able to give me some helpful feedback about what I was and was not doing right.</p> |

| Usability Test | Example |
|---|---|
| <p>Analyze some excellent examples of the genre from a usability perspective. Pretend to be a user of the genre and note how the genre helps users understand the information quickly and efficiently.</p> | <p>I recently needed to write a Statement of Purpose, a genre that's new to me. Before I even started to write, I borrowed examples from several different people who had already successfully written in the genre. Looking at how they formatted the genre, what they chose to talk about, and how they framed their goals gave me a list of ideas I could borrow from them in order to make my own work in the genre more usable.</p> |
| <p>Do a persona test. A persona is an imaginary user that reads the writing. Creating a persona includes making a list of the persona's major characteristics, including age, gender, level of education, job, and family status and giving the persona a name so that he/she becomes someone unique. The test also includes writing a few lines that describe the persona's personality and goals in reading the text, whether those goals are to give a grade or learn something about molecular biology. Once all of that is finished, find a picture online and give a face to the persona. Imagine that person sitting down and picking up the text. Look at it as much as possible from his/her perspective, thinking about his/her concerns and priorities as a reader. This reading should provide at least a few ideas about tweaks and changes that are needed to improve the paper for that possible user.</p> | <p>I've done some web design work in the past. Because anyone with an internet connection can look at writing I put on a website, I had to think about audiences I might not consider otherwise when working in genres that are harder to access. One of the most useful personas I created was a middle-aged African teacher named Nathaniel. I created the Persona Text Example shown below and it showed me how a small amount of work on a persona could help me see where the writing I was doing wasn't very usable for a specific audience. Thinking about Nathaniel coming to a website I've made makes me check to see how much American slang I have written on that page and how many pop culture references I've made. Nathaniel not only wouldn't be interested in that material, but he also likely wouldn't understand it because he doesn't live in America. Nathaniel also forces me to consider whether I've been careful about how I've broken up the information on the page into easily scannable chunks. Both of these considerations help me reconsider whether my writing is usable for the widest possible audience.</p> |

| Persona Test Example | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p>Basics about Nathaniel include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45 years old • Veteran teacher • Married • Two sons • Lives in Ghana | <p>Nathaniel's concerns include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I want to be able to find what I need quickly because I have lots I need to get done every day.” • “I prefer not to read on the computer because it makes my eyes tired.” | <p>Other background information on Nathaniel includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching in the public school system for 20 years. He quickly judges if he likes what he's reading because he spends so much time reading student papers. • He tries to avoid reading anything that he can't scan quickly unless he's reading for his own enjoyment. • Because he doesn't have a lot of time, he isn't really interested in new technology and prefers to do what he knows works. | <p>Nathaniel's typical web tasks include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking e-mail • Searching for information for teaching • Keeping in touch with family |

Thinking about the readers who will pick up a genre and use it can help us stop thinking about writing as a solitary activity involving a person and a computer screen and help us start thinking about writing as an activity that will impact someone else in the world. When we consider how our writing will be used, we can clarify what our own purposes for writing are and consider whether we are meeting the needs of the users who might come in contact with our work. Thinking about usability may seem somewhat simplistic and obvious, but as in the examples I gave at the start of this paper, it's when designers and writers don't think about the obvious that they create frustration and anger for the people who are stuck using their problematic products. So, whenever we start working in a genre, it always helps to pause for a minute and think about who will be using the writing, how they will use it, and why. Time spent considering the user is never lost time.

Endnotes

1. “Usability Basics.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.usability.gov/basics/index.html>.
2. Quoted in Bawarshi, A. S., & Reiff, M.J. (2011). *Genre: An introduction to history, theory, research, and pedagogy*. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse. Retrieved from http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bawarshi_reiff/ p. 79.



Rob Koehler is a Master's student at Illinois State University. He likes doing research, which takes up most of his time, and relaxing as much as possible, which doesn't seem to happen all that often due to his commitment to research. He'd really prefer if he could find a life choice that allowed both of these activities in equal parts, but he doesn't think it's going to happen.

The Genre of Reviews: You Want Me To Do What?!?

Allie Coursey

Coursey's article is about the experience of learning a new genre. She learned about writing in an informal manner for a movie theatre review, and she describes that struggle. She discusses how she was taught to use formal language in certain situations and that it was difficult to use casual language for this assignment. Overall, her article is about her experience as a growing writer and how she learned that even though something is hard, it can still be worth learning.

I've always been able to talk in a casual way to my friends and my family; I use slang every day just like anyone my age does. I watch shows like *Jersey Shore*, and I understand every word Snooki yells out. I am a part of a generation that abbreviates every single word in a text message. I always text my friends back with words like "def" or "totes" instead of "definitely" and "totally." One thing, however, that I've always struggled with, is writing in an informal manner. That sounds absolutely ridiculous to a lot of people, especially students my age. Most people would think that writing the way we speak is a lot easier. That is not the case for me; it has always been drilled into my head to write formally. I always write out full words instead of using contractions and make long sentences with neat and organized paragraphs. In school I was taught to follow a strict claim, evidence, and warrant and to use it religiously. But all of that changed my freshman year of college when I was introduced to the genre of the review.

Writing a review was our first assignment in my college English class, and I thought it would be a piece of cake. I thought, "I have read so many reviews of movies and things like that, this will be so easy." I was wrong. Defining a review is quite complex because a review encompasses so many different ideas. Simply googling "the definition of review" provides a lot of different answers. I learned

that a review is commentary or criticism about a specific place or thing. That thing could be a restaurant, movie, or even a performance. The instructor introduced the assignment and led a class discussion on what she was expecting. One of the most important things we talked about is what makes a review stand out. The instructor asked us to think about a newspaper review and specifically asked us to read a *Daily Vidette* review and see what we noticed about the writing style.

The review I chose will always stand out in my brain. It was about a local ice cream place, and I could not believe the language that was used. For example, the author talked about the atmosphere by saying, “Chill Out! lived up to its name by hosting a relaxed atmosphere,” I would have never worded this statement that way. I would have said, “Walking into Chill Out! I could tell that the workers and customers were very friendly and gave off good vibes which created an inviting atmosphere.” Sure I have read newspaper articles, and movie or restaurant reviews, but I never really gave much thought to what makes them different from any other paper I have written. But after reading that review I realized I write in a completely different style than the author did. I would have worded that statement in a completely different way. Not only did the article use an informal style, but it actually kept me reading. In class we talked about how review article sentences are supposed to be short and concise, and the language is informal to keep the reader interested, which was exactly how that review had been written. After being told that, I was impressed and surprised that it actually worked: I really did want to keep reading.

After discussing the style, my class also discussed how no one wants to read a six-page article about whether or not they should go to a restaurant and that a review article should not be too lengthy. The instructor encouraged us to make our review articles informal and to give interesting information first and more boring stuff at the end (so the reader actually keeps reading!). She also let us know that the trick to keeping the article interesting is to make an observation and then comment on it. For example, the restaurant reviewer said that the atmosphere was very warm and inviting which led to a really comfortable and enjoyable dinner experience. Our class also talked about how important audience is to understanding how to write a review: as an author of a review, it is imperative to remember who you are writing to. A *Daily Vidette* article, for example, is focused on speaking to college students while *The New York Times* is geared towards an older audience. After learning more about the review genre, I began thinking about how hard it would be for me to write in that manner. I didn’t know how to begin a paper without thinking claim, evidence, and warrant. We had only begun to discuss what a review should be and I was already stressed.

We were each asked to pick a place in the Bloomington-Normal community we had never been to and write a review on our new place. I looked around and most students seemed pleased and figured this assignment seemed simple enough. I, on the other hand, was terrified; my fears were not eased in the

slightest by this news. All of my classmates were pumped to explore a new place and I felt like the kid in old time movies sitting in the corner with a dunce cap on thinking that this assignment would ruin my English career forever. The only thought going through my head now was, “you want me to do what?!?” Even though I knew I would get to explore my new community, all I could think about was how I was so comfortable using my claim, evidence, warrant format and my very formal and proper language and how it was scary for me to let go, even for this particular assignment. Although I was excited about going on an adventure to a new place of my choice, I knew that sitting down to write this assignment was not going to be easy.

I thought about review articles I have read and what stuck out to me were movie reviews. They were also a big part of our class discussion. While I knew I couldn’t write about a movie because that is not a place or thing (which is what the class assignment asked for), I thought I would go to the Normal Theatre in uptown Normal. I had always had an interest in the theatre and thought it looked like a cute and fun place to explore. Its location is perfect (decently close to the quad) and it looked like a theatre out of an old black and white movie. After class I looked up movie times, grabbed my pen, some paper, and my boyfriend, and I was off. I quickly learned this theatre was different from other theatres and not just because of the old-fashioned look it had; I have never even heard of any of the movies they were showing that night.

One thing I knew was that research is vital when writing a review. As awkward as I felt walking around with my notepad and pen, I knew that later I would be happy to have so many notes. And the embarrassment was well worth it. My boyfriend and I were easily the youngest people in the theatre, and the other movie goers gave us some interesting looks while I whipped out my pen and frantically scribbled notes before the lights went down. Most people gave us “oh, college students” look while others seemed confused. I found out that when writing a review, it is important to take notes at the new place so it’s easier to remember all of the small details and better comment on them. When I got home, I looked at my notes and tried to relive the experience. I had written about my first impression of the theatre from the outside, what it looked like on the inside, and even how the theatre had smelled. I wrote about the good things and the bad things. Here are some examples of my notes:

old fashioned looking sign, bright lights outside, doesn’t look like a normal theatre, ticket booth outside, feels old, smells like old people when you walk inside, lots of older people who volunteer to work there, nice inside, looks like it has been partially renovated, actually has a place to buy food, no one in the theatre is college aged!

My notes made the experience look like a cliché movie scene, but I knew that I had enough information to write the review, that I had had a good

experience, and that I would be able to write a great article. I would write about what I saw and then make comments about my observations. I tried to keep it concise, casual, and clear.

With my notes next to me I sat down at my desk and stared at a blank computer screen. I knew that I had to write in a completely different style and I just wasn't sure how to start. A part of my first draft looked something like this:

Every person inside the theatre had a smile on their face as the lights were dimmed and the theatre darkened. It could have been due to the wonderful atmosphere, the delicious food, or the simple fact that we were there to see a great movie. If you have never been to the Normal Theatre, get a group of friends together, grab a boyfriend or girlfriend, or go by yourself because it will be an unforgettable experience at this not so normal theatre.

Many paragraphs like these with formal sentences and language formed in my head, but I knew that I couldn't write like that. Focusing on what made the review genre different was the most important thing at that moment and I kept that in the back of my mind. I looked at the notes I had written about the theatre again and decided to just jump right in. For example, rather than go into long detail about the marquee and discuss how it looked very old, I said that theatre had an old school marquee and I briefly described it and said that it really gave the theatre attitude. I thought about my audience, other Illinois State students, and tried to make it relevant and interesting to them. Here is another excerpt that demonstrates how after thinking more about the review genre I was able to make the draft more informal:

Everyone had a smile on their face as the lights dimmed; it could have been the wonderful atmosphere, the good food, or the simple fact that we were about to see a great movie. If you have not checked out The Normal Theatre yet, grab your friends, your boyfriend or girlfriend, or go by yourself, because it will be an unforgettable experience at this not so normal theatre.

After a couple hours I was done with my first draft. As I re-read my paper, I had a big smile on my face; while my paper had a long way to go, I had finished my first draft! I realized that while it was uncomfortable for me to write in a different kind of genre, it was something that I could do all along. I hated the entire process of writing and learning about review articles, but looking back, it was a valuable skill to learn. I would have never thought to make reading a paper so interesting by using tricks like short and concise sentences. Or that research for a paper—even a review—is such a crucial part of making it successful. I am happy to know that writing informally is something I can actually do, and something I can do well, and that I can now use those skills when writing in other genres. I didn't think I would learn many new skills in my freshman English class, but learning a new review was a difficult and rewarding experience.



Allie Coursey is a sophomore at Illinois State University. She is a history education major and cannot wait to teach her own class one day. She is also proud to be a member of Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, which takes up most of her free time at school. Other than that, she enjoys just having fun with her friends like any other college student.

Playing Well with Others: Demystifying the Workshop Process

Emily R. Johnston

Workshop, or peer-review, is part of writing in many genres. We cannot escape it. It *should* be beneficial for us as writers, but more often than not, it isn't. In this article, the author describes how as writers, we fluctuate between the view that *we* suck and that *our peers* suck as writers which ultimately shuts down the productive potential of workshops. Sharing from her own experience in a creative writing workshop, the author describes how she learned to see the peer-review process differently after encountering "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" (the often-inevitable "jackass" in workshops) who scribbles *three* meager words of useless judgment on deeply personal poems. At first, the author wants to run for the hills and never look back at writing again. Fortunately, her professor helps her see the value of workshop which the author passes along to us, here.

This is what every author does, at least the ones I know: we workshop. We entrust to others our writing—an extension of our best and worst selves, our intelligence and dreams, our accomplishments and fears. We open ourselves up to praise but also to criticism and humiliation. Sometimes our readers are friends or family. More often, however, they're acquaintances—even strangers, like classmates or instructors; faceless editors of newspapers, magazines, and journals; admissions committees; CEOs; even local and national officials. We take a leap of faith or (when we're feeling particularly lame about our writing) of stupidity, letting the chips of our egos fall where they may. Whether writing for professors, bosses, or the "Sunday Book Review" section of the *New York Times*, none of us is spared the experience of getting feedback on our work.

For me, things tend to start relatively well. Maybe a professor gives an assignment for a class I'm in or a journal sends out a call for papers. I scramble and scribble, punch out a draft, show it off to my B.F.F. or email it to my Mom in California. They affirm my visions of earning that A+, a prestigious publication, the National Book Award or Pulitzer Prize. My faithful readers tell me my work is "awesome," "great," "revolutionary"—that it only needs a few minor corrections, if that. I am on top of the world.

The *real*, high-stakes peer-review process, however, looms on the horizon. When the writing is for a class or some other peer-reviewed venue, this means “Workshop Day”/“D-Day” (Deadline Day). With great pride, I hand over my draft to my peers/reviewers or editors. I can’t wait to read their “interesting!” and “wow!” comments in the margins, impressed as they’ll be with my witty insights; they’ll offer suggestions for minor adjustments, but my writing, of course, is too brilliant for anything as significant as “changes” or “revisions.” In classroom-writing/workshop scenarios, I read my peers’ drafts in turn, becoming more assured of my own brilliance as I note their misspelled words, disorganized paragraphs, and lack of compelling evidence to support their mediocre ideas. I’ve really knocked this one out of the park, I congratulate myself.

But often, and more accurately, “Workshop Day”/“D-Day” knocks *me* out of the park of illusion and arrogance onto the hard streets of reality. One of two things happens that, time and again, flies in the face of all I’ve believed about writing and giving/receiving feedback:

- (a) I discover that my peers are jackasses. I gave them paragraph after paragraph of feedback on what I deem to be unsatisfactory work. They wrote two useless sentences on my masterpiece; what a disgrace! I vow never to invest myself in writing classes again and henceforth, despise them.
- (b) I discover that *I’m* the jackass when I read on my draft the copious comments from my peers/reviewers, pointing out all the errors, gaps, and confusing ideas. I hate them. I hate myself. I slink out of class or “Mark as Spam” editors’ emailed comments, my disgust with writing workshops confirmed.

Either way, I wind up throwing in the towel on being a writer. I tell myself that I’ve experienced enough rejection; that it’s time to change majors, choose a different career path, and get myself a brand new identity.

I’ll share one of my writing-soul rattling experiences that happened when I went back to school for a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Poetry in Alaska. It all began almost a decade ago. I had applied and gotten into the graduate program in Creative Writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF): “Yes!” I felt like anything was possible. Not unlike my visions of the “perfect paper” or the “perfect workshop,” I fantasized about the “perfect community of writers” in Alaska: old log-cabins for classrooms; snow gently falling and blanketing the birch trees outside; sipping spiked cocoa by crackling fires while discussing poetic greats like W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Plath, Walt Whitman. A few days after moving in, I went to the first day of the “Poetry Workshop”

fully equipped with both my insecurity and simultaneous “I’m better than y’all” attitude. For our first assignment, the professor instructed us to write several poems that were polished enough to be “critically read” by others but still new, still fresh enough to be open to suggestions. Students then would take each others’ poems home and bring them back the following class period with written feedback. So I spent that entire week composing and obsessively revising a series of poems. I deleted, then added back words; created new stanzas, then reconfigured them into multiple arrangements; I started the poems where originally I’d ended them; then I flipped the stanzas back, replacing the beginnings and endings of each poem with the originals. By the time I handed my work over to the class for their feedback, I felt confident that I could keep up with this advanced group of writers. Boy, was I wrong!

Here is evidence that attests to the devastation that *was* my first “Poetry Workshop.” The excerpt is my poetry, the result of hours of slaving over word choice, structure, imagery; the comments represent the feedback I got from one particular student—we’ll call him “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” Notice the *lack* of comments.

Thank you, J.K. Rowling, for letting me appropriate your term for Voldemort in *Harry Potter!*

Excerpt from poem entitled “Unconditional”

He didn't change shirts. He didn't change
his mind. About his Dad, Grandfather.
About any man that taught them to be men.
Though he prided himself on not demanding “women’s jobs” of me:
dinner, laundry—just *Love*, he’d say—*Unconditional love*.
Until I was up against the kitchen. Up against words, flying
to stop my own. The Silencer, he named himself
when he named his devil and tried to change.
For a year his face would boil, his fingers would clench,
pulling up the sleeves of his shirt. A Marlboro. A walk.
Nothing for days but silence.
And I'd try like the devil to bring the fire back. ||

Comment [K1]: This is a cliché

Excerpt from poem entitled “Backbone”

Around here, make noise to keep the bears away
and never hike alone.
Climbing the spine of the Continental Divide
I wade through fireweed and cedars, bursting
through red rock, with no one
with a backpack and the memory of how rage almost got me—
three a.m., three years ago.
And as I come around the bend toward Rising Wolf
a mother grizzly catches me in her gaze through the woods.

Can I tell you, this is the place I feel safe—
that this uncovering is why I came?
Can I tell you, do this, if there’s anything I can ever insist? ||

Comment [K2]: Not believable

Figure 1: Example of (Poor) Peer Feedback

Yes, that’s all he wrote.

My professor must have seen the devastation in my face during workshop, when “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” handed his “comments” back to me. The next day, she called me into her office. I stepped inside, hesitant, and she closed the door behind us. What she told me that afternoon has stuck with me ever since: “Emily, I saw his comments. Burn them.”

My professor, in fact, thanked me for tearing up in class, as it reminded her that all too often, writers come into workshops without a clue about how to give constructive feedback. She explained that writing workshops are *not* about passing judgment. She handed me the following “Peer Workshop Response Instructions”—a draft of a document she would pass out to students in the upcoming class:

“My Professor Comes to the Rescue!”

(*my* title for this document)

“Peer Workshop Response Instructions”

(the *official* title of this document)

For each piece submitted to workshop, all students will provide feedback by way of a **500-word *minimum* response** on the following:

- 1) The **literal level** in the poem: descriptions of what the poem seems to be doing. Consider such questions as,
 - a. Is the poem lyric or narrative (these or two genres of poetry)?
 - b. Who is the speaker (the person or voice *speaking* in the poem)?
 - c. What, if anything, is happening in the poem?
 - d. What other elements are at work in the poem: a particular setting, time period, or style?
- 2) Your **personal response** to the poem: descriptions of your personal reactions to the poem. *Only after you’ve described what the poem is trying to do* should you move onto describing your own opinions or thoughts. Consider such questions as,
 - a. How are images/word choices/poetic forms impacting this poem?
 - b. What emotional/mental/physical/spiritual reactions do you have to the poem?
 - c. Where are you delighted or surprised by the poem? Why?
 - d. Where are you confused or turned away by the poem? Why?

Next, my professor handed me *her* feedback on my traumatized poem from the night before. In her response, I could see this constructive-feedback

philosophy at work: first, she described what she thought was going on in my poems (their “Literal Levels”), then she gave me her personal feedback on the poems (her “Personal Responses”). The excerpted text represents her feedback, while the comments represent my commentary on it. I think you’ll catch my drift when you read it:

The Professor’s Response to my Poem, “Backbone”

Excerpts from her “Literal Level” Commentary:

“This poem seems to be about an individual speaker who is backpacking through ‘the Continental Divide.’ The speaker seems to be grappling with some painful memory pertaining to death given lines like, “how rage almost got me—three a.m., three years ago”; “a mother grizzly catches me in her gaze”; “years against your bedroom wall”; and “throw death down with a thousand steps out onto the backbone.”

Excerpts from her “Personal Response” Commentary:

“I like how the questions in the middle stanza invite me, as a reader, into the poem because they’re posed directly to the reader. This move expands the entire poem from a first-person (“I”) perspective into a second-person (“You”) perspective, thus allowing readers to consider their own memories about death as they read your poem. But I am not sure that the questions themselves are the most effective ones to ask because it’s hard to believe that anyone would feel safe hiking alone when bears are around! Can you revise the questions so that they reflect the speaker’s simultaneous fear *and* comfort in this space? I think that may make the language more believable.”

Comment [K1]: When the professor directly quoted lines from the poem, it told me that she had actually read my work and wasn’t making up ideas out of thin air. In the process of summarizing the poem, the reader gets to make sense of it before diving into any personal commentary, and I as the writer get to see how others interpret my poem. In this case, my professor thought the poem was about death. But I was really trying to write about domestic abuse. Thanks to her summary interpretation, I knew I had to go back and write some more lines to relate death specifically to domestic abuse.

Comment [K2]: My professor had warmed me up to her criticism by summarizing my poem, first. She showed me that I could trust her to read my work carefully. Rather than the “Not believable” comment that I received from the workshop jackass, I got useful feedback on how to revise this part of the poem to make it sound more believable.

Comment [K3]: I am proud to report that the final, revised version of this poem was published in the university’s student literary magazine, *Ice Box*!

Figure 2: Helpful Instructor Comments

So how can my experience in a *poetry* workshop tell you anything about workshops/peer reviews in *other* kinds of writing situations? How can we do this workshop thing well? Or if not well, at least better than we’ve *been* doing it? How can we see workshop as anything other than B.S. or utter terror? This is where I find thinking about genre to be especially useful. If genres are responses to recurring situations—as text messages and emails are responses to the recurring situation of communicating quickly and efficiently in our day-to-day interactions—then it seems to me that writing workshops are genres, too. We bring drafts to our community of writers (in whatever context, school or otherwise), we read each other’s work, and we give and receive feedback: all responses to the recurring situation of needing to expose our work to others in order to learn how to revise so that our writing has the effects we want it to have—to become stronger writers and to encourage our peers to do the same. And like any active genre worth its salt, there are variations from workshop to workshop, project to project, class to class. Yet at the core, I’ve found there are several principles for fostering constructive workshops, no matter what writing situation I find myself in:

Unlike an “inscribed genre” that is written and pretty much stays the same over time, an active genre changes, morphs, and never appears the same twice because the cultures/contexts in which they’re created take it up and refine, revise, even warp it to suit their purposes. Trajectory in action!

- (1) **Write down my expectations.** Before I can effectively participate in workshop, I need to have a clear sense of what it is that I'm actually bringing into the space and how I want things to go. So I jot down some notes: *What am I trying to accomplish in this piece of writing? What's going well, from my perspective? What are some areas where I especially need feedback?* By writing out my expectations, I allow three things to happen:
 - a. First, I can take the reins *back* from my ego which likes to remind me of my bitterness from past workshops when readers ripped my writing to shreds, or to tell me my writing is perfect and doesn't need help. Especially when writing on highly-charged topics like those in my poems from that first writers' workshop, taking this step helps me keep my emotions in check. My writing is not me; rather, it represents one form of self-expression.
 - b. Second, I can hold myself accountable for 'The Golden Rule' of workshop: I respond to my peers' work as I want them to respond to mine.
 - c. Being honest with myself about my expectations can help me leave negativity and blind optimism at the door, enabling me to focus on those aspects of workshop that *encourage* rather than *block* my writing. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" (unfortunately, as I've learned, an inevitable kind of participant in many workshops) loses his power over me and my work.
- (2) **Open my mind** to the possibility that I will learn just as much (if not more) from giving my peers feedback on their work as I will from receiving theirs on mine. So once I've identified my own expectations, it's time to dive in! It's too easy to view workshop as a mere editing session—a task to check off the to-do list. When I think that way, workshop turns into busy work. At worst, it turns into the scenario of me, crying in class just a couple of weeks into the semester. I cannot control how readers respond to my work. But I *can* control how I respond to theirs. Opening my mind simply means taking notice of where connections and *disconnections* occur between my version of the assignment and my peers' version of it. For example, in reading others' poems about difficult personal experiences, I come to understand that we *all* struggle to write clearly about these kinds of topics, but that there's no reason not to keep trying.
- (3) **Read like a writer, not like a judge.** This is my *favorite* principle—the one that makes all the others successful. This is the one my first poetry-workshop professor taught me that fateful day in her office. By

reading like a writer, all I have to do is put myself in the writer’s shoes to try and understand what genre/genres are being used, the purpose of the text, and the audience it’s targeting. I don’t have to judge anything as “good” or “bad”—words that aren’t useful anyways as they’re highly subjective and don’t give the writer anything concrete to work with. Here are some things I write about in the marginalia and at the end of a peer’s work:

- a. What is this piece about? What’s happening? What is the text trying to accomplish? How can I tell? Am I confused about these things at any point? Why?
- b. To what degree is the text working within the features of the chosen genre(s)? Is the text “bending the rules” in any way and if so, what impact does that have?
- c. To what degree does the text convey its purpose and target its specific audience? How can I tell?

In articulating these things, I can help my peers write and revise in ways that help them reach *their* goals, not mine. After all, who am I to say what “good writing” is? This strategy helps create that community-learning spirit in which I can learn just as much from reading *your* work as you can from reading *mine*. I don’t have to be “right” or “wrong;” nor do I have to be responsible for how “successful” your work is in terms of grades, publications, and so forth. Best of all, I avoid making enemies based upon whether or not I “like” someone’s writing.

Even as I write this article, I am keenly aware of the fact that you may think it is crap. Or maybe (though doubtful) you think it’s the best thing you’ve read in years. Neither judgment is useful to me as the author *or* to you, my dear reader. Why not? Because both perspectives are cop-outs. Let me explain:

- **Outright rejection** tells me nothing specific about what I stink at doing and thus, what I need to pay attention to when I sit down to revise or to write my next piece. This also means that you, the reader, have learned little to nothing about what makes a piece of writing fall flat. So how will you know when *you’re* putting your readers to sleep?
- **Generic praise** tells me nothing specific about what I am doing “well” and thus, what I should continue doing in my writing. This also means that you, the reader, have learned little to nothing about what makes a piece of writing grab your attention and make you want to keep reading. So how will you know whether or not you’re compelling in your *own* writing?

* * *

Last I heard, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had dropped out of our MFA program and was working as a campus-shuttle driver for the university. His girlfriend had gone traveling abroad, leaving him to live in a run-down cabin on the busiest, noisiest street in Fairbanks, AK. I rest my case: playing well with others really *does* pay off.



Emily Johnston is a second-year doctoral student in the English Studies Program at ISU. An author of poetry and Pulitzer Prize winning to-do lists, Emily hopes to become an author for *Lonely Planet* so she can get paid to go on yoga retreats, stay in funky hostels around the globe, and then write about her experiences!

Working with a Net: How Constraints Can Enable Writing

Niall Nance-Carroll

In this article, Niall Nance-Carroll explores how choosing a form with limitations can enable one to write more easily. Using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on the pleasure of work and his own experience attempting to write in a poem for a creative writing class, something far outside his writing comfort zone, Nance-Carroll examines the benefits of relying on preexisting constraints to guide one when writing in an unfamiliar genre.

In a preface to some of his earliest work, famed French writer Albert Camus rejects praise for his essays “because at twenty-two, unless one is a genius, one scarcely knows how to write” (6). Camus is a harsh judge of his own work. His easy dismissal of his essays, which are better than most of us can ever aspire to write, can be strong discouragement for anyone with literary aspirations. Of course Mary Shelley puts him—and certainly any one of us—to shame, having pretty much invented both the gothic novel and science fiction by writing *Frankenstein* before she was twenty. For me, on the other hand, literary precociousness (accomplishment beyond the norm for one's age) is already a lost cause. Not only am I already too old to match Shelley's feat, but I would not place myself among those likely to mark the literary landscape even if I should devote my life to it. The greatest of writers invent and innovate with ease, but much of the time the rest of us must be content to work with variations on established forms; both because invention is quite hard work, and because most of our audiences not only expect but often require conventions.¹

While I write quite a bit, my work is of an analytical bent rather than a literary one.² I analyze literature and popular culture, applying various theoretical perspectives and closely examining patterns. Such writing, carefully researched and heavily revised, is my strength and the foundation of my professional identity; when called upon to do almost any other type of writing, I fall back on familiar techniques (I had numerous footnotes even for a personal narrative assignment).³

Part 1: In which the author struggles with free verse and finds an unlikely ally

Nevertheless, I once was obliged to hammer phrases and bend words to the demands of writing poetry in a creative writing class. I had signed up mainly because it fit my schedule and I needed another credit in composition. When I first had to write a poem as an assignment, I looked hopefully to free verse, which would not require rhyme, meter, rhythm, or any other organizational pattern that I would have to learn to use. I will admit that these sometimes got in the way of telling a story; it just always seemed like there was so much information that was too important to leave out. Without a rule to constrain the assemblage of words, I reasoned, my poems would be free to leap onto the page of their own free will. Faced with the first assignment, I discovered that this was not to be; a blank screen mocked me. All the experience I had from writing papers for high school and the beginning of college seemed inapplicable. The poetry that I had scribbled in the margins of my notes while not paying attention in math classes was no help either. It did belong to this general category of free verse, but it was terrible. A great poem in free verse can access an image or a feeling in language that is just beyond the everyday: when Carl Sandburg wrote “The fog comes/on little cat feet,” he gave us something that could not have been more elegantly stated in rhyme. Attempting to rhyme might have resulted in “the fog was fleet,” which would have lost the sense of slow silence. My free verse broke lines haphazardly, as much because of the margins of the page as some poetic instinct, and the images it used are not indelibly written on my mind. They are forgotten, discarded into recycle bins or packed away in boxes of old schoolwork never to be seen again—the fate they merited. I recognize now that my attraction to free verse was born of a process of elimination. I was not inclined to count syllables, so iambic anything was out of the question. I did not want to use rhyme because, in my experience, it always ended up sounding silly, as if it was trying too hard, or it relied too much on clichéd rhymes.

It turns out that Dr. Seuss made rhymes look easy, when they are actually really hard.

All set then, to write a poem that did not have a rhythm, a rhyme, or a shape, I hoped for some flash of insight that presumably would usher in a delightfully new poetic thought, supplying at once a new form of poetry and content to match. My hopes were dashed as the evening passed. I typed and

deleted a few words at a time, all the while discovering that I was definitely not a young poet in the making. Admitting that I was not going to write a great poem, I attempted at least to write *a* poem, any kind of poem, so long as I had something to turn in that would not embarrass me. But without any idea of what this could consist of, I kept drawing a blank on how it should even start. After forcing myself to continue on one draft until I had several lines, I was disappointed to see that they came off as a rip-off of the music I had been listening to while I wrote. Defeated and saddened at the discovery that I did not possess hitherto hidden talents, I flipped through my creative writing textbook, regretting that I had thought this would be a good way to pick up the extra composition credit. It was there that I discovered the sestina, the genre that was to become my poetic salvation. To my surprise, the most attractive quality of the form was not the freedom it afforded my writing, but the constraint. In contrast with the plethora of options afforded by every line of free verse, the guidelines for sestinas were strict. They also required repetition, not only of sounds but of words. Once I had committed to the words that would dominate the poem, the rest of the task was mostly filling in around them.

Part 2: In which the author digresses from poetry to write about jam

At the time my discovery that limiting my options on a given task made it easier and more fun came as a surprise. I had always enjoyed having choices, but when it came to writing a poem, a plethora of options left me adrift. It turns out that I am not alone. Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice* describes two experiments that suggest that more options do not necessarily make for more happiness. On the contrary, beyond a certain number of choices, consumers do not like having more—they actually prefer having fewer. Schwartz explains that a chocolate tasting with 6 choices made consumers happier than one with 24, a jam tasting with 6 choices sold more jam than one with 30 (19-21). The study was run by Sheena Iyengar, and in her book, *The Art of Choosing*, she elaborates on it: the test was in the Menlo Park Draeger’s grocery store, “well known for its awe-inducing shopping experience,” boasting 3,000 cookbooks, 250 mustards and so forth, Draeger’s “was undoubtedly attracting attention to its unparalleled selection” (183-4). People shopped at this store because it had so many options, and yet they were less likely to buy after being presented with more of those options than with fewer. This is perhaps because choosing from such a large variety leaves us exhausted; in trying so hard not to make the “wrong” choice, either we end up avoiding any commitment at all and buy no jam, or else as soon as we do choose we begin to doubt the wisdom of that choice—hence my frustrating first attempts at making free verse.

Part 3: In which the author returns to examine the sestina

To explore the definition of *sestina*, consider one written by Algernon Charles Swinburne in 1872. His is more ambitious than mine (although, considering that he published quite a bit of poetry and even invented a form whereas I took one creative writing class, it ought to be):

Although not the sestina.

WHAT IS A SESTINA?

A sestina is a poem arranged into stanzas of six lines. The last word of each line of the first stanza reoccurs at the end of the lines of each of the following stanzas, and then in the three line envoi, two of these ending words are used per line.

So in the first stanza the words are 123456 and in the second 615243, in the third 364125, in the fourth 532614, in the fifth 451362, and in the sixth 246531. Then the envoi: words 1 and 4 on one line, 2 and 3 on the next line, with 5 and 6 on the last line. See the poem to the right for an example.

“Sestina” by Charles Algernon Swinburne

- 1 I saw my soul at rest upon a day (1)
- 2 As a bird sleeping in the nest of night, (2)
- 3 Among soft leaves that give the starlight way (3)
- 4 To touch its wings but not its eyes with light; (4)
- 5 So that it knew as one in visions may, (5)
- 6 And knew not as men waking, of delight. (6)
- 7 This was the measure of my soul’s delight; (6)
- 8 It had no power of joy to fly by day, (1)
- 9 Nor part in the large lordship of the light; (4)
- 10 But in a secret moon-beholden way (3)
- 11 Had all its will of dreams and pleasant night, (2)
- 12 And all the love and life that sleepers may. (5)
- 13 But such life’s triumph as men waking may (5)
- 14 It might not have to feed its faint delight (6)
- 15 Between the stars by night and sun by day, (1)
- 16 Shut up with green leaves and a little light; (4)
- 17 Because its way was as a lost star’s way, (3)
- 18 A world’s not wholly known of day or night. (2)
- 19 All loves and dreams and sounds and gleams of night (2)
- 20 Made it all music that such minstrels may, (5)
- 21 And all they had they gave it of delight; (6)
- 22 But in the full face of the fire of day (1)
- 23 What place shall be for any starry light, (4)
- 24 What part of heaven in all the wide sun’s way? (3)
- 25 Yet the soul woke not, sleeping by the way, (3)
- 26 Watched as a nursling of the large-eyed night, (2)
- 27 And sought no strength nor knowledge of the day, (1)
- 28 Nor closer touch conclusive of delight, (6)
- 29 Nor mightier joy nor truer than dreamers may, (5)
- 30 Nor more of song than they, nor more of light. (4)
- 31 For who sleeps once and sees the secret light (4)
- 32 Whereby sleep shows the soul a fairer way (3)
- 33 Between the rise and rest of day and night, (2)
- 34 Shall care no more to fare as all men may, (5)
- 35 But be his place of pain or of delight, (6)
- 36 There shall he dwell, beholding night as day. (1)
- 37 Song, have thy day and take thy fill of light (1,4)
- 38 Before the night be fallen across thy way; (2,3)
- 39 Sing while he may, man hath no long delight. (5,6)

He chose rhyming words, although it is worth noting that these are not rhymes that would normally impress anyone “may,” “day,” and “way” along with “night,” “light,” and “delight” would not be impressive alone; but because they have to continue showing up again, it is necessary to choose words that can naturally repeat quite often, unless one is really looking for a challenge. He chose a more universal topic and one more accessible than the pop-culture pastiche I chose, and his poem merits its long life. Swinburne’s final line “Sing while he may, man hath no long delight,” states, in relatively straightforward terms, an insight into the human condition that is in no way new but remains poignant every time a work of art reminds us of it in such moving terms.

An imitation of several other works.

Whereas my poem merited a good grade in an early creative writing class; a humble goal, but one it achieved admirably.

Aside from the syntax (the order of the words) and the old-fashioned “hath.”

Poetic forms that offered more freedom had left me thinking “I know I *can* do it this way, but am I really supposed to?” Perhaps for someone with greater artistic aspirations this would not have presented as much of an issue, but I was aiming to be competent, not impressive. Without the boundaries of a fixed form, I could only use the most arbitrary measure of “I like this” or “I don’t like how this sounds” to determine whether the poem was going well. I could agonize over such a poem for hours and go back and forth about word choice, but unless it was really good, there would be no evidence that I had put forth that effort. At least for the sestina I could take refuge in the fact that those last words were not allowed to change. It was not my lack of imagination but the constraints of the form itself that demanded repetition. I wrote a first stanza that I was reasonably happy with (although it has long since been deleted, a fate that it no doubt wholly deserved). I struggled to come up with additional stanzas based on the words that ended the first stanza but getting the lines to end in those words was such a tortured process that these additional stanzas were awful. I scrapped that ambitious attempt and instead started with the words that would need repeating. I chose a line from a song that seemed somehow both evocative and banal: “there were milkmen every morning.” I split “milkmen” into two words (to get me up to the six end words needed for a sestina) and committed to the phrase.

The poetic equivalent of a paragraph. In a sestina, it is a group of six lines.

Using only those six words as the heart of the sestina, I composed the last three lines or *envoi* first, since they needed to appear there in a specific order, and then wrote more lines to fit them. Figuring out interesting ways to use the same six words to end lines over and over is tricky, but it got easier once I had committed to that task, having closed off the possibility of ending the lines with any other words but those six and in that prescribed order. There were still a number of possible lines, but at least that number was no longer infinite. It still took me most of a night to get it into a shape that I was happy with, but by the next day I had a sestina. This is not to say that it was a great sestina, but by the end I had managed to write a poem, and on time for the

assignment. I titled it “Echoes of Judy’s Jungle” (a variation on the title of the Brian Eno song that I took the milkmen phrase from) and it is still probably my best poem ever (trust me, the competition isn’t that fierce). My poem was an assemblage of preexisting elements; the envoi was taken directly from the song, the situation and sentiment were taken not from my life but from books and television shows (shifting from mock-epic and over-the-top sentiments to a suddenly plainer and more somber tone as the serious nature of a situation set in), and the form of the sestina determined the rest. It became less an act of creation than a tying together of disparate parts into a cohesive whole.

Part 4: In which we attempt to explain why writing the sestina was enjoyable

What was especially curious is that despite the initial struggle I actually enjoyed writing the poem. I experienced a little moment of joy every time a phrase fit well or I figured out how I would end the line with the word I needed; it was satisfying to come up with a solution to each problem that emerged. On occasion I still notice clusters of six words and think, “maybe I should write a sestina around that.” This is just because I like having an envoi composed of only six words, an additional limitation I have imposed on the sestina format which perhaps makes it more of a word game than an artistic production; then again, I’m not really a poet. Sometimes I even bring up the sestina template that I made for that assignment and make an attempt. It was not that the final product was so impressive. I did not feel the need to show it around (which is why the poem does not appear here), nor did I suddenly think of myself as a poet. Yet, the process was enjoyable. Why was that, and more specifically, why did the writing only become enjoyable when the form had stricter rules?

The template just lists the numbers in the appropriate order so that I can use the “Find and Replace” option in Word to replace each number with the word I have chosen.

The answer to this probably has more to do with psychology than writing itself, although it certainly had implications for how I approached new writing tasks. Psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observes that if one can balance the difficulty of a task with one’s ability to perform it (and the ability to tell if one is performing it well) than even tasks that we find frustrating can be exciting (32). For one to experience this pleasure in work, he explains, “a person should perceive that there is something for him or her to do, that he or she is capable of doing it” (30); and “the activity must have relatively clear goals and provide rather quick and unambiguous feedback” (32). Csikszentmihalyi’s explanation of how work becomes rewarding in and of itself provides a means of understanding why writing within those boundaries was enjoyable for me in a way that writing without them was not. A skilled

poet or reader of poetry presumably could have identified the qualities of free verse with a discerning eye; they could recognize artistic merit where I could not. Nevertheless, I could recognize a sestina's formal characteristics and determine whether my poem had achieved them. Accepting the arbitrary conventions of these poetic forms gave me some sort of standard to strive for and a sense of whether or not I was successful. Csikszentmihalyi's research suggests that with a clear understanding of how to complete a task, the ability to determine whether or not one is completing it well, and a task that provides the correct level of challenge (ideally work that is just within our capacities), something that we conceive of as work can become enjoyable. As poetry was not something that I was writing for pleasure—at least not on that occasion, the ability to make it enjoyable was unexpected. This kind of immediate pleasure of work is unavailable when one cannot recognize or evaluate what constitutes success in the task; I could not determine whether or not I was succeeding in free verse, but I could when working in a fixed form. Providing feedback on my own poem contributed to my enjoyment of writing.

The well-known American poet Robert Frost likened writing poetry without rules to “playing tennis without the net.” That comparison may not be entirely fair to brilliant modern poets who invent wondrous new games of their own, but as I discovered in that creative writing class, I am not a brilliant modern poet. I can, with some work, compose a pretty good sestina. This was largely because the sestina demands a strict but straightforward set of identifying characteristics. As long as one follows those rules then the result is a sestina, not necessarily a particularly good one, but a poem that belongs to the general category. While I survived that creative writing class, I also learned that I did not have the skills or the heart for such work. As I continued to study literature, I noted that it was the transparency of these identifying characteristics that made some genres, even quite complex ones, more accessible. We might take Frost's analogy in a different direction: learning to play a game is extremely difficult when the rules are not obvious. Frost seems to have imagined that tennis without a net would be much easier; however, that net is also a clear physical marker of shots that clear versus those that do not. Imagine a net-less court where that marker is gone. All of the rules still hold, shots that would not have cleared the net would still not count, but to the novice observer or player it would not be clear why someone lost a serve. Perhaps this is the situation we often experience when trying to compose in new genres without stated rules; a frustrating series of mistakes that initially appear thoroughly arbitrary. A game or a task with stated rules may be difficult, but at least there are rules to follow. For tasks with unstated rules, we must decipher the rules before we can make any progress.

Endnotes

1. This does not mean that those who do not invent a new form lack creativity; great authors have worked within established conventions. Stephen King did not give up because someone had invented the horror genre and William Shakespeare did not abandon the stage just because someone else had thought to write tragedies and comedies. Even genres that are considered “formulaic” have not been exhausted, new plots are not necessary for innovation, just new variations.
2. I study literature and write about it; rather than making any attempt to write the Great American Novel, I examine the Great American (or British, or other literature written in English or translated into it) Novel to see what techniques authors use, the social contexts in which they produce their work, and the ways in which that work has been received.
3. I will admit that these sometimes got in the way of telling a story; it just always seemed like there was so much information that was too important to leave out.

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Breaking Down Grammatical Snobbery: What Comedian Stephen Fry Can Teach Us about Language Flexibility in Genres

Autumn Jackson

In this article, Autumn Jackson looks at a blog post by comedian Stephen Fry in order to gain insight into the matter of grammatical prescription or “snobbery.” Through Fry’s and her own examples, she explains some language rules and how those rules are not merely one fixed set of laws. She looks at the concept of genre to understand how and when certain language rules might apply.

Stephen Fry, the British actor, might be vaguely familiar to many American audiences as the voice of the Cheshire cat from Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* or as the guy who used to do a comedy show with Hugh Laurie (from Fox’s *House M.D.*). You’re probably not familiar with their comedy series, *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, unless you’ve had a lot of access to BBC reruns from the late 80s and early 90s. To get a sense of what they covered, think of something along the lines of *Saturday Night Live* crossed with *Monty Python*—a minimally-cast series of sarcastic sketches which often relied on word play and puns, British dry humor inspired by everything from London street jabber to presumptuous literary history.¹ Fry knows a thing or two about the power of words: he’s performed in and written plays, he’s got a degree in literature from Cambridge, and he’s an outspoken social activist.² So it should come as no surprise that he likes to talk about language, language rules, and how they can flex to make language fun.

Fry had an obsession with all of English’s possibilities even back in his days on *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*. In the show’s first season, Fry’s in-sketch character compares words and language to piano keys and music.³



Figure 1: A Bit of Fry & Laurie

He remarks that a piano has “*only* 88” keys, and yet, he says, “hundreds of new melodies” can be composed from those keys. His manner of delivery is over-the-top, exaggerated, and repetitive, but through the laughter, the metaphor rings true. Language is a creative entity; new sentences can always be arranged or uttered. We’re all capable of taking something that’s already been said and saying it again in a wonderfully new way, a way that makes it sound more important or more delightful or more horrifying than ever before. “And yet,” Fry accuses in this sketch, “we all of us spend all our days saying to each other the same things, time after weary time.” I see that happening, in part,

because of concern with correctness and appropriateness, but like Fry, I believe there must be some balance between being “correct” and toying with words.

I’d like to look at language here, as both the music and the keys, and discuss the usefulness of rules—because, as I realized when I bought a keyboard five years ago but didn’t invest in piano lessons, you can’t just hit random keys and expect to make beautiful music. There are genres in which traditional grammar “rules” (e.g. *by whom* instead of *by who*) are better to use (first in my mind, for example, is a literary analysis), and there are genres which have different or more flexible sets of guidelines (such as text messages, notes to friends, or emails to Grandma—if your Grandma’s as hip with the internet as mine is). Different rules work in different contexts.



Figure 2: Fry’s “Don’t Mind Your Language...” Blog Post

Prescriptivism and language rules

Fry’s fascination with language is *not* a grammatically-perfect obsession; he recognizes that the traditional grammar rules don’t always hold. There’s a post on his blog from November 4, 2008, titled “Don’t Mind Your Language...” in which he stands up against people who insist on grammatical “snobbery.”⁴

He’s especially annoyed by those who are concerned with correcting common nuances of language, word orders or spellings or apostrophe placements that are considered incorrect according to snobbery but are used by many people on a regular basis. Those who’d interrupt a sentence to fix a word are his “snobs.” Think of the command, “Never end a sentence with a preposition!” Really, no tragedy has ever come of a dangling preposition. More importantly, a sentence like “that’s something to stand up for” is understandable in almost all contexts; that *for* shouldn’t have to be moved to the middle of the sentence, says Fry, only to appease the snobs.

There’s a more precise term than snob that fits here—prescriptivists. Linguistic prescription, or prescriptivism, attempts to establish and maintain a single “correct” version of a language.⁵ Anyone who considers another’s language deficient just because of something like a dangling preposition is a prescriptivist. Fry concedes that even prescriptivists have the right to their own opinions, but insists that following every single obscure or arbitrary prescriptive rule won’t make for *better* language.

So when should we follow rules about dangling prepositions and “real good” grammar? Consider an example I saw on Youtube recently about grammar correction by Weird Al Yankovic, a man who made his career by changing songs such as “My Sharona” into things like “My Bologna”—not exactly the first person you’d think of when talking about uptightness and grammatical prescriptivism.⁶ In this clip, he “fixes” a supermarket sign to say *15 items or fewer* in place of *15 items or less*.

Whether or not you know the grammatical difference between *less* and *fewer*, you’ve probably utilized the *15 items or less* line in a grocery store when you had between 1 and 15 items (unless you’re one of those who tries to sneak 17 things through). It’s unlikely anyone has ever been lost in that supermarket because *less* refers to mass nouns—that is, uncountable things like “water” or “flour”—rather than things you can actually count like “cookies” or “items.” So, if the difference between *less* and *fewer* is of little importance in the

I do not agree with prescriptive grammars at all! Not at all! But I’ll confess here: I *really* can’t stand seeing signs or posters imploring me to “Have a real good time!” No, *thanks*, I always think, *I prefer to have a really good time*. But this is something I’m working on, trying occasionally to have a real good time.



Figure 3: Weird Al Yankovic’s Grammar Lesson on 15 Items or Less

Or could Weird Al be parodying prescriptivists? That would fit his whole career, wouldn't it?

context of the supermarket, why complain about it or go in like Weird Al and “correct” it?

Fry rants that “there is no doubt what ‘Five items or less’ means, just as only a dolt can’t tell from the context and from the age and education of the speaker, whether ‘disinterested’ is used in the ‘proper’ sense of non-partisan, or in the ‘improper’ sense of uninterested.” In the same way, you can gather from his explanation the two different meanings of *disinterested*, and even if you’re not familiar with the word, you can probably see that *dolt* means something like *blockhead* or *numskull*.⁷

Genre: the grammar rules get shifty

The concept of genre can help us understand why these rules are more important in some contexts than others. There are situations in which one way of speaking or writing works better than another; there’s still that difference between the literary analysis paper, where I’d remark “fewer references to the author’s splendid wife would improve the poem,” and my email to Grandma, where I’d try to convince her that “less socks for Christmas” would be a good thing this year. The differences aren’t only between the printed-paper-for-class and computer screen; when writing an email to my boss, I use a different tone, a different style, and different vocabulary than when I write an email to a friend. And, of course, exactly what I have to say to each of them affects all of the aspects of the message. In short, I use different forms of language depending on the text’s genre.

Because I like talking about language almost as much as Fry does, let’s look at another example—*who* and *whom*—and place them in different genres to see what happens.

It’s normal that *whom* is simply left out of language in favor of its shorter relative *who*: “Who do I love?” “Who are you talking to?” In fact, according to the prescriptive approach to grammar, *whom* is correct in both of those questions according to the prescriptive approach, but in non-prescriptive contexts (like many genres of writing and speech), it’s fading out of English, or at least becoming the unusual form. The prescriptive grammatical reality is that *who* is a subject and *whom* is an object: “The man who calls daily is standing outside your door!” vs. “Whom does he want to see?” (Here’s a trick, if you’re in a prescriptive pinch and need to actually use these according to tradition: for a fast check to see if *whom* is really what you want to use, just try inserting *him* or *her* into your statement—“he wants to see *her*.” He/she is the subject; him/her is the object.)

But let me repeat myself. Let me scream it: that difference between *who* and *whom* is part of a PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR. It’s formal—snobby,

by Fry’s word—and you just *might* have to use it in some cases but won’t in others. Unless your audience is concerned with that difference, *who* can fit both roles; in fact, it might even work better, depending on the genre. *Whom* might sound appropriate in a researched essay on presidential appointments for a history class: “The man whom Lincoln chose to stand beside him...” but might not work the same way in demanding to your friends: “I want to know on whom you pulled the prank.” That’s a fine sentence, to be sure, but “I want to know who you pulled the prank on” conveys the same meaning—and will keep your friends from laughing at you (unless I’m one of your friends, in which case I’d turn the discussion toward the fascinating use of prescriptive grammars in casual genres, and you’d never find out who the victim of the prank was).

Notice all those *mights* in my examples. There’s no definite *this word will work* here. I could use either *who* or *whom* among my friends in conversation, and because they know me and my love of grammar, both would be okay and conversation would flow on. But in the middle of a family dinner, I wouldn’t use the word *whom* because I know it would hinder the meaning of the sentence; my family’d respond with raised eyebrows, groans, and sighs of “why, Autumn, *why?*” and probably throw a glob of mashed potatoes at me.

Fry doesn’t use the word “genre” in his blog post, but he certainly recognizes its significance:

You slip into a suit for an interview and you dress your language up too. You can wear what you like linguistically or sartorially when you’re at home or with friends, but most people accept the need to smarten up under some circumstances—it’s only considerate. But that is an issue of fitness, of suitability, it has nothing to do with correctness. There is no right language or wrong language any more than are right or wrong clothes. Context, convention and circumstance are all. (Fry, “Don’t Mind Your Language”)

So, although Fry doesn’t want us to talk about *correct* or *incorrect* language, we can talk about language that fits a context or genre. Just as you probably wouldn’t want to show up for an interview for an office job in pajamas, you probably won’t use the abbreviation *u* in place of *you* when writing an email to a professor, not to mention a scholarship application. I wouldn’t do it in my email to Grandma, because she’s not savvy with that lingo, but my brothers use it all the time in emails and texts to me. The higher the stakes of writing, the more “dressed up” we tend to make it. High stakes writing refers to the formal and heavily graded or weighted writing we do (think: college application essay, or final exam essay worth 20% of a class grade), and there’s a tendency to “dress up” such writing with the traditional prescriptive grammar rules.⁸

Conventions and grammar rules: reading the context and making music

The conventions that Fry mentions—the particular setting, situation, audience, and purpose of a text—vary per genre. A prescriptive grammar cannot fit into every type of writing, as we’ve seen, but we can look at the conventions of certain genres to see what type of grammar would fit best: the conversation at my family’s dinner table and a note I scribble to my mom and stick on the fridge do not have any conventions which demand the use of *whom*. Conventions tell us what is acceptable or normal in different genres.

In seventh grade, I was taught not to write *you* when I wanted to create an example: “You can ride the best wooden roller coaster at Michigan’s Adventure Amusement Park,” but to replace it with that ugly nonpersonal pronoun *one*: “One can ride the best wooden roller coaster...” *One* is third-person, I was taught, which is more appropriate for formal writing. I was told: No more papers dominated by *you* misconstructions; the mysterious *one* is neutral. I wasn’t told it’s prescriptive and that’s why it’s reserved for formal genres.

I used *one* in seventh grade and for many years after, but I never got over the clunkiness of it and do all I can *not* to use it now. Perhaps if I were used to different genres of writing—say, in the field of Information Technology—it’d sound like a good fit. But I do not and am not writing in that field. Wouldn’t you have been annoyed with me if I’d spent this whole paper saying “one must look at the conventions” instead of addressing you as *you*, especially as I know that you are a you? Would *one* fit the genre conventions of this journal?

The conventions are important and identifying them will help you to get the language right in a certain genre, but I think Fry would want me to remind you of language’s flexibility: that there *is* wiggle room even inside the conventions! Like the rules, they’re not stiff, not forever fixed in position. If they were, we’d really all be saying “the same things, time after weary time.” You may be writing in a genre but what you’re writing doesn’t have to be *generic* (meant here in the recently-made North American sense of “typical; dull, unoriginal, nondescript”⁹). Some genres call for strict, prescriptive-like language, and others want looser, more shaken-up language; some audiences will react better to straight-laced constructions, and others will smile grandly at unwoven wordings. But, even when you’ve got to work under constraints, the sheer expanse of the English language means that in any given situation you’ve got more than one way to say something.

Remember the piano keys? Following the conventions of a genre or a writing assignment doesn’t mean there’s no flexibility in *how something is said*. And just because prescriptive rules exist doesn’t mean we have to follow them blindly. We need to balance the rules with our own styles and see how those

styles fit into the conventions. The idea of the piano keys is that: if you're comfortable playing the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" (the only one I can passably plunk out) as it's usually taught, that's probably sufficient. But sometimes the conventions (or the venue at which you're playing this imaginary piano) allow you to do something a little bit different with it, and the results can be very successful—Stevie Ray Vaughan's blues version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is testament.¹⁰ Ultimately, how you use the rules of language depends on the *situation*, the genre, the purpose of the text, the audience, and so on—but it also depends on *you*.

Fry demands that, above all else, you *enjoy* language, that you take pleasure in knowing that rules are flexible and you can bend them for fun. He says:

Words are your birthright. Unlike music, painting, dance and raffia work, you don't have to be taught any part of language or buy any equipment to use it, all the power of it was in you from the moment the head of daddy's little wiggler fused with the wall of mummy's little bubble. So if you've got it, use it (Fry, "Don't Mind Your Language").

Consider the change in impact if he'd written, "all the power of language was in you from the moment you were conceived." The point is the same—but it's not quite as expressive as his wording. He's said it in a way that's funny (he can't escape being the comedian) and a bit risqué. Not only are his images powerful and entertaining, but the words have a *spark* to them; they're surprising and various and when we read them, instead of a few plunked-out notes in sequence, there's a new and captivating melody.

Now the question is: how can you make language work for you?

Endnotes

1. More information about "A Bit of Fry & Laurie" can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/abitooffryandlaurie>.
2. Much of the information about his life comes from Fry's website <http://www.stephenfry.com/>. His blog can also be found through that website.
3. You can watch the clip ("Stephen Fry & Hugh Laurie: The Subject of Language") at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHQ2756cyD8>. A transcript can be found at: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/A_Bit_Of_Fry_And_Laurie#Episode_3.
4. The post can be found here: <http://www.stephenfry.com/2008/11/04/dont-mind-your-language%E2%80%A6/>.

5. Linguist David Crystal has a lot to say on this subject, and my definition is influenced by him. Plenty of articles about English, its usage and change, are available for free at his website: http://www.davidcrystal.com/David_Crystal/articles.htm.

6. This video, titled “Weird Al Yankovic - grammar lesson,” can be seen at: http://www.youtube.com/user/alyankovic?blend=3&ob=5#p/f/5/RGWiTvYZR_w.

7. I can’t take credit for thinking up the synonym “numskull.” These two words are in the definition of “dolt” given by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).

8. More information on “high stakes” and “low stakes” writing: Elbow, P. (1997). “High stakes and low stakes in assigning and responding to writing” In Sorcinelli, M. D., and Elbow, P. (Eds.) *Writing to learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing across the Discipline*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 69. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

9. Again from the OED.

10. Listen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aP2RzLNIbw>.



Autumn Jackson is obsessed with the English language, whether she's teaching it, writing in it, playing with it, or interrogating it. She's working on a Master's degree in that very subject, in fact, and after finishing that degree plans to continue spreading critical visions of language around the world.

Annotated Bibliographies for Dummies

Angela Gentile

Gentile's article takes you through the process of writing an Annotated Bibliography. She bases the steps on her own experience of writing an annotated bib her freshman year of college. From learning how to pick out useful mastery texts to providing excerpts from her own example, she demonstrates how this genre can truly come in handy.

Imagine yourself sitting in a classroom, listening to your history teacher assign a ten-page research paper that requires all sorts of sources and information. This paper is due a month from now and you think to yourself, "I can just wait to do it until the last couple of days before. This should be an easy assignment anyway." After a month of major procrastination and avoidance, you find yourself sitting in front of your computer the night before the assignment is due with a blank document before your eyes. You have absolutely no sources, not a single word on an outline, or even an idea to start off with. I found myself in this exact situation throughout my high school career. Fortunately, in college, I started using a tool called an annotated bibliography that helps in situations like the one I describe above.

I was first introduced to annotated bibliographies in one of my high school English classes. I was never required to actually complete one in that class, but I did learn the basic steps of the process. I became interested in this type of genre right away, as I thought to myself, "this could be really helpful." The idea of not having to go back and search through each source when I was writing the research project truly intrigued me. I could

complete all of the hard research at the start of my work instead of waiting until the end.

It was not until the beginning of my college career that I decided to create an annotated bibliography. In my English 101 class, I could choose to complete any sort of research genre as a project. After looking around through various examples of papers, journals, and articles, I decided an annotated bibliography would be the most interesting. After knowing I wanted to do research for this type of genre, I gathered a set of “mastery texts,” which are useful examples of the genre you are creating. To find these texts, I searched the Internet for different examples of annotated bibliographies to mark up and evaluate (See Figures 1 and 2 for examples). Three to five different annotated bibliographies were plenty to get a good idea of what this genre consists of. After printing them off, I went through each one and highlighted different features I thought were important. I looked at each detail closely and figured out exactly what I needed to include in my final project. I wrote comments on the side of the mastery texts, too, so I would clearly remember all of my thoughts.

After I could barely see white on the paper anymore, it was time for my next step in investigating the genre. I took all the different notes I wrote on the Internet examples and transferred them onto what is called a rubric. This rubric is a set of criteria that needs to be included in an

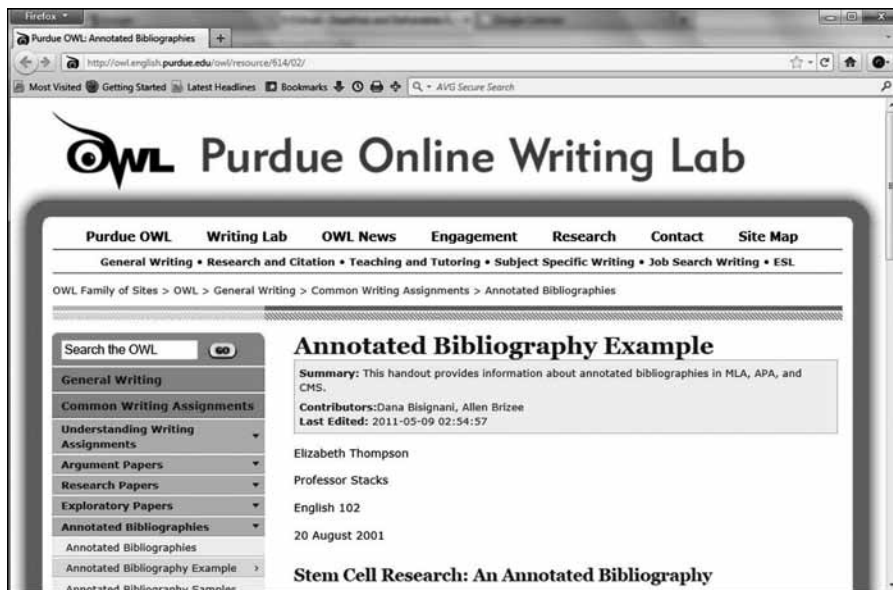


Figure 1: Purdue Online Writing Lab
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/02/>

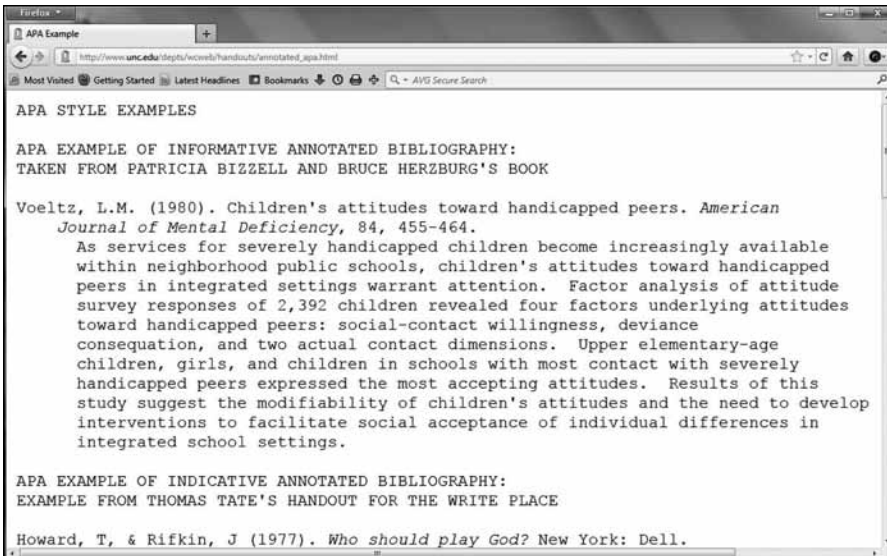


Figure 2: The University of North Carolina's Writing Center
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/annotated_apa.html

annotated bibliography. It was easy to compile all of the features because all of the mastery texts had important similarities. For example, I noticed that each citation in each bibliography was in bold letters. In addition, I noticed that each summary was to the point and did not include too many details. I found that the assessment and reflection portions were personal and opinionated as well. Because of this, I knew these features definitely needed to be included within the rubric. I'll talk more about my rubric and how it helped me write in a bit, but right now I want to actually give a definition of the annotated bibliography and what I use it for.

An annotated bibliography is a set of summaries or evaluations of sources related to one large topic. Searching for multiple sources related to a topic can become very lengthy, but having a variety of summaries of those sources can help with the writing process for any kind of research. This is my interpretation of an annotated bibliography, but different situations will require different interpretations. For example, an instructor in a different class may have a different understanding of an annotated bibliography. As I said above, I use the annotated bibliography to help myself be prepared for large research projects, but of course, you can use it for other purposes. I want to take you through the process of how I assemble my annotated bibliography so you can see and hopefully use some of my techniques and ideas.

Process

When I start off my annotated bibliography, I ask myself what research question I am trying to answer. What is the main purpose or topic of this research project? I know that if I make this clear to myself from the very beginning, narrowing down searches later on will be a lot easier. After I choose my topic, I create a working title, and I write it very precisely at the top of my paper in bold letters: **Genetic Engineering: An Annotated Bibliography.**

In the Library

After I choose my topic and the title is successfully written, it's time to actually do my research. I start off at Milner Library. I usually go straight to the books and in this case, I looked thoroughly through the genetics section. The good thing about annotated bibliographies is that for books all you really have to do is scan the pages to get a summary of what the book is about. The summaries are not supposed to tell you each exact detail of the book, but rather give an overview of what the book is about. I scan through several books and generally find a lot of quality information that helps me understand what the book covers. I also make sure that the book I'm scanning will help me write my paper and be useful later on. If the book isn't useful or related to my topic, I don't include it in the annotated bibliography. I have sticky notes next to me while searching through all of the books to mark any pages that have especially great information that I may want to find quickly later on.

After I have found a good number of books, I also surf the Internet and databases as well. In this case, I used the Proquest Platinum database, accessible through Milner Library's website, which had a lot of good information. It also has abstracts at the beginning of each article so it's easy to see what the source will be about. For this particular assignment, I used three articles total. After the library trip, I also read through magazines and newspapers and watched videos on YouTube to help find more resources. Although searching through these sources helped me with more ideas, I did not use them for my project. Once I find enough reliable sources and have adequate summaries of what they are about, I start my bibliography.

On the next page is an entry taken from my annotated bibliography on designer babies. I have written comments to show how I used my genre research and rubric to create this entry.

McGee, G. (2000). *The perfect baby* (2nd ed.). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

This book focuses on the philosophy of reproductive genetics and cloning through the eyes of certain “experts.” These people can range from a mouse geneticist to a retired physicist. Although there are thousands of books and articles related to this topic, this book focuses on the effects that reproductive technologies have on the child who came from them. It also touches on what it means to be the parent who decided to use these procedures. Additionally, the book shows the relationship between philosophy, social science, and public life in general. This edition specifically explores all technologies and possibilities that have emerged since the 1990s. Changes in genetics and reproduction have been created at such a rapid pace throughout the years, and this book is one that takes its audience through the ride. It makes it clear that the chance of covering all aspects of newly made technologies is nearly impossible, but it gives an invitation to explore the most important aspects. Instead of completely demoralizing the issue of genetic engineering, the author simply discusses intelligent goals within social and political contexts.

This book seems like a fairly reliable source, in my opinion. Instead of reviewing the attacks or defenses related to reproductive technologies, McGee decides to write about texts written by actual scientists or parents themselves. This makes the research more reliable, as the opinions and facts are coming from individuals dealing with the issue first hand. It is not biased because he discusses further goals as well, while trying not to declare a side which he is on. He somewhat describes both sides of the issue (just in a few sentences) to start his descriptions of certain issues. His facts are well documented because he acknowledges all of his sources in the beginning of his novel.

I believe the information in this book would be very helpful to complete a research project related to this topic in greater detail. The *Perfect Baby* gives a sense of intelligence, and not simply opinion. The focus on history, philosophy, and other aspects makes it more reliable. Additionally, the sources used give vivid points, as having experienced reproductive processes first hand. The specificity is perfect considering McGee asks questions before every topic he discusses and answers them thoroughly.

← This is an example of a summary of one of the sources I chose. In this case, I used a book. I go into some detail of what the book was about. I do not write every single idea down because I only need to get a basic idea of what is in the source when I go back and read my annotated bibliography.

← This is an example of the assessment I did to follow my summary. I answer several questions that help me see if the source is any good.

- Do I trust the author who wrote this source?
- Does it contain biased information that seems to only support one point of view?
- Is the source well documented?
- Is it current or does it contain old information?
- Is the information scholarly, popular or some of both?

I didn't necessarily use all of these questions; however, they all can help when writing an assessment.

← Each entry should have a summary, assessment, and reflection paragraph. Most annotated bibliographies should be single-spaced without an indentation.

← After these two paragraphs, it was time for me to reflect. This was most helpful for me in the long run and ultimately determined whether or not I would actually use the source. I asked myself more questions.

- Will the information in this book be helpful to me?
- How much opinion is there compared to the number of facts?
- Is the information too general or specific for my topic?
- How will this specific source fit in with my research topic?
- Most importantly, does the source repeat the same concepts as other sources I have already found?

Just as in the assessment, these questions will all be beneficial, but you don't have to use all of them.

More Rubric Details

Length: The length of an annotation depends on the research project I am completing. A twenty page journal article is going to have a longer annotated bibliography than a three-page research paper. The length of the annotation could also depend on the length of the source; a two hundred page book is going to have a longer annotation than a one page news article.

Language: The language of the summary is generally academic because I am writing about an academic source. The assessment and reflection have a personal tone to them because, after all, I am writing information and answering questions that pertain to my specific interests. This is what I have found works best for language based on the mastery texts I looked through. However, you might find the tone of your mastery texts to be somewhat different.

Citation: For my citations, I use APA style because I am an education major and that is the style used in that field. MLA and Chicago Style are common as well, depending on what field you are working in. This bolded annotation should be placed before the three paragraphs and all the annotations should be in alphabetical order. The number of sources you need depends on the project, but for this particular assignment, I found that I needed at least five sources along with citations. I found this number to be the most helpful in preparing so that I do not have too much of the same information at the same time.

Conclusion

All in all, I have a quite helpful process for preparing to write in research genres. Before, I always thought, “All of my ideas will just come to me while completing an assignment, why waste all that time beforehand?” I now know how much better my assignments can be if I complete an annotated bibliography first. I don’t forget to mention any details while also feeling more prepared in the end. I do not stare blankly at my computer screen when starting an assignment because now I have a tool that will give me an idea of where to start and continue on from there. In addition, I know that the sources I am using are reliable and useful to me and my paper, project, and so forth.

Everyone has their own interpretation of what annotated bibliographies can be used for. For example, a professor might assign an annotated bibliography to demonstrate a student’s understanding and ability to connect different texts and concepts. Whatever the case may be, this type of genre is flexible enough to satisfy different writing situations. I have found many positives while creating annotated bibliographies; they’ve been a useful tool that has kept me prepared and organized. I hope they can do the same for you and your research.



Angela Gentile is from West Chicago, Illinois and is currently a sophomore at Illinois State University studying Family and Consumer Science. Since her childhood days “playing school,” she was always aware of her dream of becoming a teacher. She absolutely loves everything about college and is finally experiencing life away from a strict Italian environment. Angela adores her family and friends and truly does not know what she would do without them.

Swimming in Literary Analysis

Kristi McDuffie

McDuffie describes the process of learning the genre of literary analysis after returning to school from the workforce. She describes the discomfort of asking for help in learning how to research. She also articulates the difficulty of finding an original thesis statement. Ultimately, she finds that learning a new genre is always going to be somewhat uncomfortable.

My first semester in graduate school was intimidating. I was coming back to study English after being in the workforce for four years as a credit analyst. My undergraduate degree was in business and I decided to go to grad school in English because I had always loved to read. I was nervous about the many unknowns of graduate school, such as how much homework I would have and how I would live off a meager paycheck. I also had to navigate a new campus, including the library, parking, and lunch spots. Most of all, I was worried about writing papers. I had learned to write credit reports and prepare PowerPoint presentations, but it had been a long time since I had written an English paper, and I didn't know what to expect.

Diving In: My First Assignment

One of the classes I took my first semester in my Master's program was an 18th Century British Literature course and the first big assignment was a five-page midterm essay. I felt like an imposter in that class; most of my peers had majored in English and were continuing their studies in grad school. They

had years of English classes with literary analysis papers. I had only taken *one* English class in college. Most of my preparation came from my high school English classes, but by the time I was sitting in Brit Lit, eight years had passed. I had some catching up to do. This assignment felt like a test for me to prove I could keep up with my peers and prove that I belonged in the program.

As soon as the professor handed out the assignment sheet, fear set in. Where was I supposed to start on this “literary analysis”? The assignment sheet said I needed an original thesis statement, so I figured that was as good a place as any to start. I have always hated admitting weakness, so I didn’t want to ask my peers for help. I didn’t want anyone to recognize me as a fish out of water, so I looked for answers on my own. I Googled “thesis statement” and found the Purdue Online Writing Lab’s website. But rather than offer me a single or straightforward definition, the site listed several options. The third option, an argumentative paper that makes a claim backed up by evidence, seemed most in line with the assignment sheet. From my high school English classes, I remembered that this evidence should be quotes from the literary text I am writing about, such as a poem, play, or short story. My investigation helped me understand that I needed a topic, an argument, and evidence... but I still had the problem of the *original* thesis statement. Despite my difficulty treading water, I still didn’t want to ask for help. I put aside the thesis statement and looked for how else I could move forward with the paper.

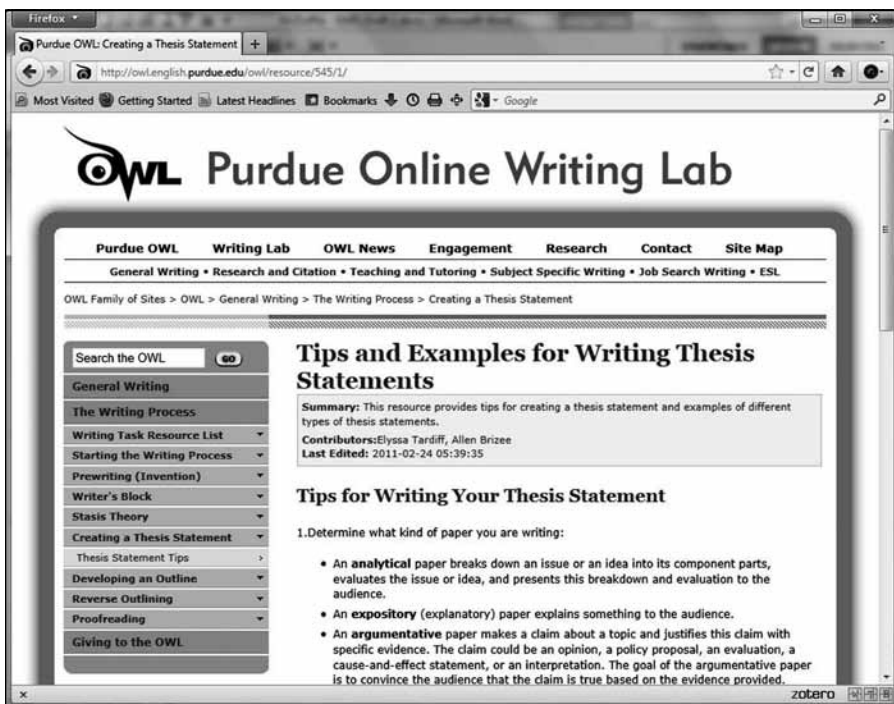


Figure 1: Purdue Online Writing Lab

Beginning with the Butterfly: Researching Journal Articles

In addition to a thesis statement, the assignment sheet required that we use at least five scholarly journal articles in our paper. Earlier in the course we had read scholarly journal articles as assignments, so I knew that they were long-ish papers written by academics for other academics. The professor had provided these articles, though—how was I supposed to find more on my own? Since I'm the kind of person who will drive around for forty-five minutes rather than stop and ask for directions, it seemed unlikely that I was going to arrive at an answer before the due date. It was time to swallow my pride.

Embarrassed over my lack of knowledge, I asked one of the second-year students about how to find journal articles. He was a bit impatient with me, being someone who majored in English and had been doing research for years, but he agreed. He showed me our school library's website and how to get to the databases. He explained that MLA International Bibliography is one of the best search engines for English topics. He demonstrated some of the basics of searching, like how to put keywords in the search box and specify that I wanted to search for those words in the title of the article. He didn't teach me everything about searching, but he taught me enough to make me feel a little less overwhelmed.

With that tutorial under my belt, I figured it was time to choose a text. We had to write five pages about one of the works we had read, and I had liked *The Country Wife*, a play written in 1675 by William Wycherley. I liked the

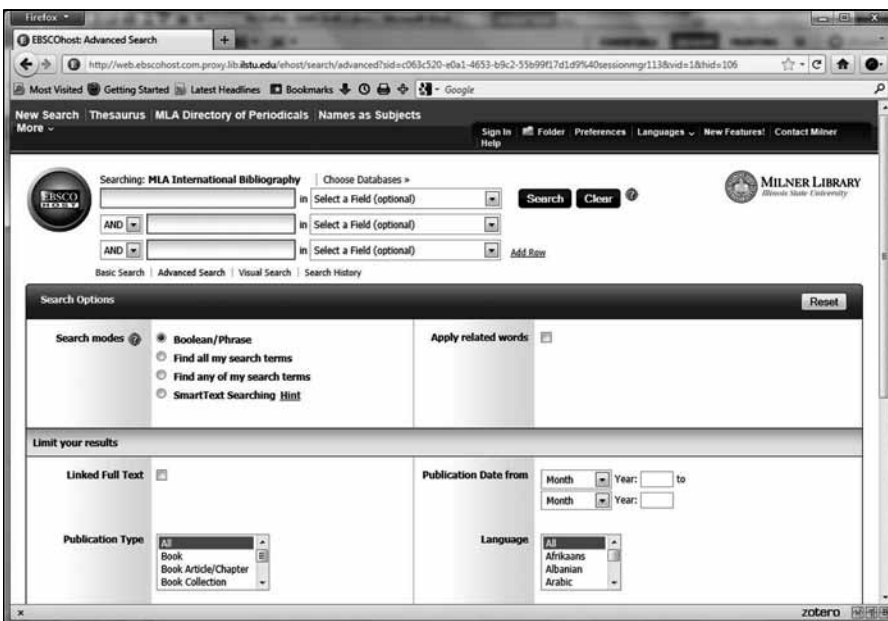


Figure 2: MLA International Bibliography

play because it was scandalous and funny. It was about a man who pretended to be a eunuch (a new word for me, which means a man who has been castrated) so he could have affairs with married women. That sounds like an oxymoron, but the point is that by pretending to be impotent, husbands were less protective of their wives around him. The play was also about a new young wife from the country who comes to London and is intrigued by the city and its men. The play itself and our class discussion about it had been mostly about the male characters, so I was interested in writing about the women. One, Lady Fidget, seemed sophisticated and adept at cheating on her husband, while the country wife read as a bumbling idiot who was naïve about sex. These two women offered different depictions of sexuality, and this train of thought led me to a topic of women's sexuality in the play. I still didn't know what kind of argument I could possibly make, but at least I had a topic!

Despite this big step, I couldn't move forward with a thesis statement because I was still stuck on the "originality" clause. In the English papers I had done in high school, I did not need to use journal articles, so my papers were always based only on the texts themselves. Originality did not seem to be as important then. But it was important now, and I began to think it had something to do with all of the articles we had read and had to use in our papers. Writing in this genre—and being original—seemed to relate to the research requirement: if I knew what other people had said about the play, then I could make sure I said something else.

With those thoughts in mind, I returned to the library's website to see what others had written about the play. I plugged in "The Country Wife" in the search box and specified that those words be found in the "title" of the articles and hit Search. The search returned sixty-one results. *Sixty-one* articles. There was no way I could read through that many titles. After staring forlornly at the screen for a few minutes, I noticed a checkbox on the left hand side that said "Scholarly (Peer-Reviewed) Journals." Since that was what I wanted, I clicked on the box and hit Search again. Thirty results this time. Much better.

In retrospect, the next thing I did was ridiculous. I printed almost every single article that I found about *The Country Wife*. That bears repeating. I printed about *twenty-five* scholarly journal articles about this play (for a paper that required *five* sources in *five* pages). I don't really know how to explain this irrational behavior, except to say that I thought that in order to make sure my argument was original, I had to see everything that anyone had ever published about the play. Looking back, I could have saved myself a lot of time and money by reading the abstracts (which I came to learn were short summaries of the articles that are easily

available through the search engine) *before* I printed out any articles. Or I could have read only the articles that were relevant to my particular topic of female sexuality; it was unlikely that arguments about other topics would have affected my own thesis statement. But I learned all of this later. At the time, I just sat down with stacks and stacks of paper and tried to get through the articles. I'll admit I didn't read these articles in their entirety—I would have needed weeks and weeks for that. Instead, I tried to read the first couple of pages and if the information seemed useful, I put it in one pile; if not, it went into a recycle bin. I also highlighted any parts of articles that seemed to be about women's sexuality. But even with these strategies, I was frustrated at how time-consuming research was turning out to be. I hadn't even started writing yet!

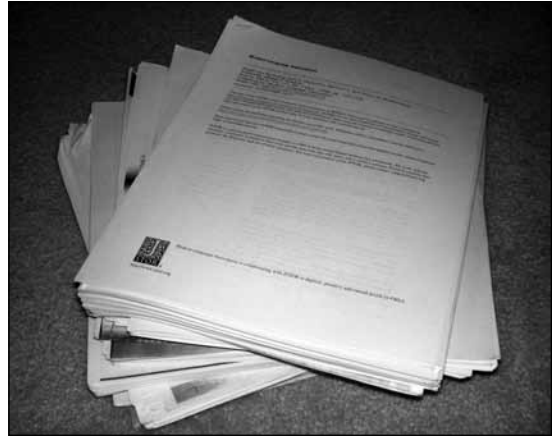


Figure 3: A Stack of Journal Articles

Back to the Backstroke: Discovering an Argument

When I finished going through the twenty-five articles, I ended up with six articles that mentioned my topic of women's sexuality, so I tried to read those articles in more depth. One of the articles talked about women's rights during the 1700s. It turns out that in England during this time, women were considered property and lost all of their rights and assets (including any money, land, and inheritance) to their husbands upon marriage. My twentieth-century feminist sentimentalities were outraged at this information, but as my anger simmered, I realized I could use this history in my paper. What if this loss of rights was affecting the women's sexuality in the play?

With this last question in mind, I skimmed the play again and noted the lines where the two main female characters did or said something that related to their sexuality. I paid specific attention to the places in the text that the journal articles discussed. I also brainstormed how these actions and dialogue related to the historical background I had researched. Two things became clear by the time I had finished rereading the play and taking notes. First, Lady Fidget seemed more "advanced" sexually because she often cheated on her husband. The country wife, in contrast, wanted to cheat but had not yet done so. She was in training, so to speak. As the play progressed, the country wife became more like her seasoned role model.

The second idea that became clear to me was that these women's affairs were made more daring and rebellious because they had so few rights as married women. Since the women were considered their husbands' property, their actions reflected on their husbands. So when women had affairs, I thought, perhaps they were doing it to rebel against their husbands. Since nothing I had read interpreted the play in this same way, all of a sudden, I realized I had an original thesis statement. I could argue that Lady Fidget and the country wife were drawn to extramarital affairs as a way to rebel against their husbands given their devalued positions as property. Score!

Here is what my introduction and thesis statement ended up looking like after a couple of revisions, along with some comments about how I tried to use what I learned about the genre:

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>The women in William Wycherley's <i>The Country Wife</i> sometimes get overlooked in light of the heavier themes of masculinity and honor. Yet the women's behavior and purpose in the play provide ample opportunity for enlightening discussion. As a playwright, Wycherley has misgivings about women with legal power (Bacon 439). He paints many of the women as promiscuous and sexually aggressive. However, it is important to consider the social setting of the play to fully understand the women of <i>The Country Wife</i>. Once their actions are analyzed within the historical context, it becomes clear that the women are actually asserting great independence by taking control of their sexuality. In a society where married women cannot own property, and are considered property themselves, they have lost their identities. Thus adultery in this scenario is a form of rebellion. It is one of the few ways that women can rebel against their devalued social position in their marriages and in society.</p> | <p>This was my first thought when I started thinking about the play. This introduction basically follows the thought process I had when I came up with the argument.</p> |
| | <p>This is an example of how I used one of the required scholarly journal articles.</p> |
| | <p>Here is where I bring up the historical context of women being property.</p> |
| | <p>I used big vocabulary words, like <i>masculinity</i>, <i>enlightening</i>, and <i>asserting</i>, to try to sound like the journal articles.</p> |
| | <p>These last two sentences contain my "original" thesis statement. I am trying to say that the women in the play are having affairs to rebel against their husbands.</p> |

I felt good about writing this introduction and having a thesis statement, so I danced around my stacks of journal articles for a few minutes. Of course, my celebration was quickly dampened by the fact that I had to write the rest of the paper. I won't describe how I wrote the rest of the paper, especially because it would take another ten pages to describe the often

frustrating process. But in the end, I met the requirements of a five-page literary analysis that used a minimum of five scholarly journal articles. It was my first attempt at this genre in eight years and my first attempt that included scholarly journal articles so, needless to say, it was not my best work. But I still did it, and I felt a little bit better about swimming with the big English fishes.

When I wrote this paper, I thought the composing process was old hat for my fellow graduate students who probably only spent a few hours on this five-page paper, rather than the days that I spent on it (partly because of my newness to the genre and partly because of my unrefined research skills). Now that I have taken a few classes, however, and am no longer the newbie, I think my classmates probably feel out of their leagues too. Even within the genre of literary analysis, each paper presents new topics and different guidelines that will always make us somewhat uncomfortable. And though I have been able to refine some skills (like reading abstracts of journal articles to help me know if I need them before reading them), other skills (like writing a thesis statement) remain extremely difficult for me. I still stress about finding an original argument that will make me sound smarter than I feel. The good news is that I have become more comfortable asking for help, so I don't flounder around as much when I struggle. And I always offer to show new students how to use the library's search engine.



Kristi McDuffie is a second-year Ph.D. Student in English Studies at Illinois State. She is focusing on rhetoric and composition and doubts she will ever write another literary analysis paper ever again, although she will undoubtedly write lots of other kinds of analysis papers. When she is not writing papers, she is playing with her one-year-old son, whom she hopes to raise to ask for directions when he needs them.

Learning About the Genres of Biology

Alyssa Shapiro

This article explores the different types of writing that are encompassed in the biology genre. The goal of the author, Alyssa Shapiro, was to better understand how writing is used in biology careers and distinguish what makes the biology genre different from other writing genres. Using personal experience and research, Alyssa shares what she learned about the finer details of the lesser known biology genres.

As an aspiring biologist, I wanted to learn more about the biology field, including the kinds of writing I would do in the field. As a first step in this investigation, I wanted to learn about career options. I always thought that my only career options were to continue on in school to get a degree in medicine or to get a Master's to become specialized in a specific section of biology. After doing some research, I came to realize that there is a lot more out there in the profession than I initially thought. First I had a conversation with my advisor at Illinois State University, Megan Larson, who told me that a biologist is anyone that tries to expand our understanding of the natural world around us. While many biology students pursue careers in the healthcare profession, a lot of students seek out careers in research (Larson). I found out that if I wanted to be a scientist, it was important for me to be a strong writer. Successful scientists must be able to write many different kinds of texts, including papers for scientific journals, essays for research grants, lab notebooks, and even textbooks.

Research is vital to the field of biology. One of my professors, Dr. Wade Nichols at Illinois State University, states that biologists continue to do research in order to gain a better understanding of how the world works (Nichols). Some possible careers are laboratory technicians, research technicians, research assistants, and

professors of science, which all require strong writing skills. Each of these careers has its own writing genres in order to present the data they have accumulated.

Though research is important in biology, scientists would never be able to perform their research without getting funding. So, once I learned more about the research side of biology, I wanted to learn more about how that research is paid for. One text that biologists use to get funding is a grant application. Grant writing is necessary for science professors and private laboratories because grants are great project funding tools (Nichols). To learn more about grant writing, I talked to a professor I know, Dr. C. F. Shaw at Illinois State University. Dr. Shaw explained that obtaining grants is one of the best ways to fund research and that researchers must explain why what they plan to study is worthwhile, what procedures will be performed, why that is a good way to find results, and why their research team is the best team to do this research (Nichols; Shaw).

I also researched grant organizations that fund scientific research. I found some commonly used grant organizations including the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). These government funded organizations are two of the most prestigious funding organizations in the United States. The NIH funds projects that will help increase our knowledge of current issues in health (“About the National Institutes of Health”). The NSF funds research that will further science as a whole and help us gain a greater understanding of the world (“About the National Science Foundation”). If I were applying for a grant, I would have to be sure that I follow the granting organization’s directions and policies exactly so my research could be considered eligible to receive a grant. Grant proposal guides, which explain the application process for grants, are lengthy and detailed. For example, the NSF Grant Proposal Guide is 32 pages long and is extremely detailed. If the writer doesn’t follow every step correctly then he/she will be denied (“Grant Proposal Guide”). Grant writing can be a tedious task because each grant organization has a specific submission format (Larson). It takes years to receive grants because it is a long writing process and it can take almost a year for grant organizations to process funding requests. Even though grant writing can be a difficult, time consuming task, it is a necessary part of the research process and it is worth it in the end (Larson; Nichols; Shaw).

Another genre of writing in biology that I learned about is used in the laboratory itself. Once a research group is able to get funding for their research, they must begin running tests and collecting data. That is when a laboratory notebook comes in handy, and this is one of the most common and important forms of writing that biologists produce. Laboratory notebooks are maintained by researchers in order to document results and write down procedures so they can be repeated by the original researcher or other researchers that want to perform the same procedure. Researchers write down each step of the

experiment or procedure they are performing and what day they performed them. Not only are experiment steps included, but pictures, diagrams, results, and any other beneficial information is included. Researchers write in their notebooks every day and keep them up to date so they do not miss any steps or forget anything they have done when carrying out an experiment.

I have experience maintaining a lab notebook because I have had to keep them for some of the classes I have taken. Also, I volunteered in a research lab and I had to keep an up to date notebook on all of the experiments I performed. My notebook had to be updated each time I did an experiment. I had to include the date, the procedure I performed, all of the steps I completed, and any other information I used that day. Laboratory notebooks have been used for centuries by many different scientists and alchemists, including Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo (Shaw). Science is very competitive, so these notebooks are used as proof of when scientific discoveries occur and who discovered them first. Also, notebooks are not allowed to be removed from a lab because they may have classified information.

After I learned the importance of scientists documenting every experiment they perform, I needed to find out more about what scientists do with the data they collect. Once scientists collect all the data that they need, they can use the information to write a scientific paper. In my classes I have had to read and approximate writing several journal articles about various topics in biology. My professors preferred we use journal articles as sources because they are the most up to date because journals take a shorter time to publish than books. In addition, most journals require each paper submitted to be peer reviewed to ensure high quality work. I will talk more about peer reviews later, but a peer review is when other scientists read and edit your article to make sure the data and information is correct. Journals can be found in hard copy or online. I found that scientific journals are very similar to grant organizations because each one has its own requirements. Some journals have short page limits of 3-5 pages while other journals do not have a page requirement at all.

While requirements may vary, after reading several articles, I noticed that each journal has a basic format. Papers submitted to journals usually include a title page with the name of the paper, the name of the authors, and their credentials. The paper contains an abstract, or a summary of what the paper is about. The abstract allows readers to get a quick look into what the paper is about and helps readers determine if they will continue reading or not. Some journals ask authors to include keywords of the articles after the abstract, while others do not. The introduction, which introduces the hypothesis of the study and gives a background on the research that was performed, comes after the abstract. Following the introduction, there is a materials and methods section that explains all of the procedures performed and the equipment used to complete

them. This section relies heavily on the information from research notebooks because it is important for all experiments to be reproducible. Next is a results section where the authors include all of the data that they collected when experiments were run. The results section also includes any tables or graphs that the author wishes to include. The discussion section explains what the results mean and acts as a conclusion of the paper. Lastly, most scientific papers include an acknowledgement section, a place to mention any sources that funded the paper, and a reference section, a collection of all the texts the author referred to throughout the paper. Usually articles have a lot of references because they show that the data is supported. More sources usually means more reliable work.



Figure 1: *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*

To get an accurate understanding of how a journal submission should be formatted, I looked up some real papers in some professional scientific journals. I found “Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome: Long-Term Medical, Surgical, and Psychosexual Outcome” by Dr. Amy Wisniewski, et al. in the journal *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*. This paper has the general format most articles have, but when I read it, I thought it was strange that it combined the introduction with the abstract section and that the results section wasn’t separated from the results section. Once I looked at the guidelines for the Journal I realized it was formatted because that is what the journal requires. Journal articles must match a journal’s format exactly, or it will not be published (*Current Genetics: Instructions for Authors*; Helmann).

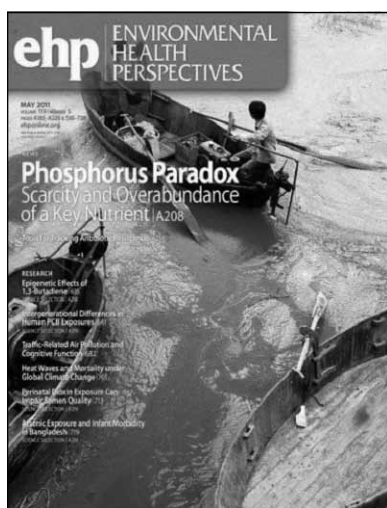


Figure 2: *Environmental Health Perspectives*

I also studied the article “Atrazine-Induced Aromatase Expression is SF-1 Dependent: Implications for Endocrine Disruption in Wildlife and Reproductive Cancers in Humans” (Fan et al., 2007) in *Environmental Health Perspectives* and used it in one of my classes. The paper is formatted so that the results are stated and then explained in a discussion or conclusion section. Separating these two sections is a common characteristic of scientific articles.

Another important aspect of these articles is the form of citation. Most scientific articles are written in MLA or APA format, but some journals have their own format specific to that journal only. Lastly, by investigating these journal articles, I learned that what the paper says is more important than the actual person that performed the research presented in the paper. For that reason, first-person is usually avoided.

Through my investigation, it has become clear to me that most journals are very strict about the papers submitted to them. By setting strict guidelines, journals can ensure they receive only the highest quality of work. Once a manuscript is submitted to a journal, editors check the format and then send the papers to peer editors. The peer editors comment on any corrections that should be made and they also decide if the research discussed in the paper is worth publishing. Once the paper is reviewed, it is sent to researchers to be corrected. Once researchers adjust their papers to meet the journal's requirements, the paper is published. Papers in journals help scientists learn more about their field and create new hypotheses based on new discoveries ("Current Genetics - Instructions for Authors"; Helmann). This process seems stringent, but I now know that if a paper is published in a high quality journal, I can trust the information in that paper.

While scientific journals are important, I have found that journals aren't the only publications I could publish my work in. Many scientists, especially professors, write books. In many cases, professors contribute to writing textbooks for the topics they focus on. I know this because most of the textbooks from my classes were written or contributed to by the professors that taught the classes. A great example of a textbook is called *Vertebrates: Comparative Anatomy, Function, Evolution* by Kenneth Kardong. This book discusses all of the current information about the evolution of vertebrate organisms and it compares all of these organisms to one another. Writing for textbooks can be demanding because science is constantly changing (Shaw). Even if this form of writing is demanding, it is rewarding to have a hand in educating future scientists. If I decide to become a professor, writing for textbooks would be a good outlet for me to share my knowledge of the biology field.

A biologist does not have to work in academia, however; many biologists conduct research at private organizations such as Abbott Laboratories and Baxter. I decided to learn more about these organizations because both of them have locations close to the town I live in. I have grown up passing them every day so I was curious about what type of writing these companies use. Both of these organizations focus on health-related science by researching possible drugs and healthcare equipment. These organizations utilize many forms of writing in order to share their findings and promote new products. One type of publication used is a press release.

A press release allows the organization to tell the media about a new product and what it does. This type of publication is not just meant for people in the scientific field. Press releases are also meant to be read by the general

public with the hope that people will buy the product. A press release will discuss new developments that pertain to a product released by the company. It may introduce a new medicine, warn people of unexpected side effects, or update the public about improvements or changes a company is working on. In addition to press releases, these organizations post supplemental information about their products on their websites.

The screenshot shows a Firefox browser window displaying the Abbott website. The address bar shows the URL: <http://www.abbott.com/news-media/press-releases/2011-sept8.htm>. The page features the Abbott logo and navigation links. The main content area is titled "Press Release" and contains the following text:

Abbott Initiates International ABSORB BTK Clinical Trial for Treatment of Below-the-Knee Critical Limb Ischemia

- › ABSORB™ is Designed to Treat a Patient's Blocked Vessel and Then Dissolve, Leaving the Vessel Free of a Permanent Metallic Implant
- › The ABSORB BTK Trial Highlights Abbott's Commitment to Developing Innovative Technologies to Advance Endovascular Therapy

September 08, 2011

Abbott Park, Illinois (NYSE:ABT) — Abbott today announced the initiation of ABSORB BTK, an international clinical trial evaluating the safety and efficacy of the ABSORB™ bioresorbable vascular scaffold (BVS) for the treatment of below-the-knee (BTK) critical limb ischemia. Critical limb ischemia, a severe form of peripheral artery disease (PAD), occurs when blocked vessels impair blood flow to the lower extremities, which can eventually lead to limb amputation. ABSORB restores blood flow by opening a blocked vessel and providing support to the vessel until the device dissolves within approximately two years. The first patient was enrolled into the ABSORB BTK trial by Marc Bosiers, M.D., head of the Department of Vascular Surgery at St. Blasius Hospital in Dendermonde, Belgium.

"Patients with critical limb ischemia often progress to where they have few options beyond limb amputation, so there is a tremendous need for new therapies to prevent this outcome," said Dierk Scheinert, M.D., Professor of Medicine, the University of Leipzig, Germany, and principal investigator of the ABSORB BTK trial. "The ABSORB device represents the next generation in revascularization therapies that may hold promise for patients with vessel disease in the lower leg. With the ABSORB BTK trial, we will test whether this novel approach – restoring blood flow with a temporary scaffold – has the potential to improve the outcomes of patients with critical limb ischemia."

The ABSORB device is made of polylactide, a proven biocompatible material that is commonly used in medical implants such as dissolvable sutures. Because a permanent metallic implant is not left behind, naturally occurring vessel functions may be restored, which is one of the features that make this device a significant innovation. In January 2011, Abbott announced that ABSORB received CE Mark and is authorized for sale in Europe for the treatment of coronary artery disease. ABSORB currently is under development and is not available for sale in the United States.

ABSORB BTK is a prospective, single-arm, multi-center trial designed to evaluate the safety and efficacy of the ABSORB device in up to 90 patients with below-the-knee critical limb ischemia at up to 10 clinical trial sites in Europe and New Zealand. The primary endpoint is a composite of freedom from major adverse limb events (major amputation, revascularization, or death) within one year, or death within 30 days of the procedure.

Figure 3: Abbott Press Release

This information is meant for health professionals that are looking for more information about products on the market. These are commercial organizations, so they focus on researching to discover new products and improve upon products, with the goal of making a profit.

Organizations that are non-profit usually use research as a way to find treatments and cures for a disease as well as increase awareness about the illness. One example of this is the American Cancer Society, an organization that raises money to do research on cancer prevention, treatment, and more. The American Cancer Society releases informational texts that include information about cancer prevention, how to find cancer, and how to get treatment. These texts are written so any person can understand them, making them reach a wider audience. Non-profit organizations have different priorities than commercial organizations, but they both release informational texts to help readers, especially those who are not in the biology field.

My investigation into the biology field revealed that although there are many different professions, many professionals rely on the same texts. Professors, advisors, and researchers alike use scientific journals to learn more about their field and tell others what they have learned. Many people may be surprised that science depends so much on writing to communicate new ideas and share information. Biology professionals use writing in order to receive funding through grants, accumulate their research in laboratory notebooks, share their findings in scientific journals, and educate others through textbooks. Without writing, the field of biology could not exist in its current form, and without biology, we would live in a much different world. Learning about the writing genres in the biology field has been very helpful to me as I try to learn more about my future career. This investigation into the genres of biology has given me some mixed emotions. It is intimidating that there are so many guidelines and restrictions on scientific writing. But it is also very exciting to think that the writing I can contribute will help others. Scientific writing is a gateway to learning more and I cannot wait to embark on that journey.

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Alyssa Shapiro is a recent graduate from Illinois State University with a degree in Biology and a minor in Chemistry. She is currently using the knowledge she learned while researching for this paper to find a job in biological research. In her free time she loves doing community service and she belonged to two community service organizations when she attended ISU.

Reading Visual Texts: A Bullet for Your Arsenal

Susana Rodriguez

Susana puts her art background and Art History degree to use by deconstructing how images work as visual texts. Using Apple's iPod banners as examples, she unpacks ideas like subject, iconography, color, composition, and perspective into easily digestible tidbits for use in analyzing other images, advertisements, posters, stickers, graffiti, art, and secret valentines.

I like those iPod ad banners. The ones almost every other city skyscraper's wallpapered with in a screaming rainbow of neon colored backgrounds and silhouettes of people rocking out to their music collections like it's 1999. In fact, I really like those silhouettes because they let me pretend I'm cool and can totally tear up my own imaginary dance floor without anyone silently judging just how awkward and out of time my steps actually are. Through Apple, I can be queen—no, *empress* of my own personal disco and no one can say anything against my benign, indie-folk-electro-pop dictatorship. That's what's beautiful about Apple's ad campaign: me, my dog, *anyone* can be those silhouettes—just visually fill in the blanks.

But what are these blanks Apple wants consumers to fill? I can't even tell who those people are or what they're listening to, except that they're some of the hippest kids with their hoodies and fedoras, dreads and pompadours, and is it just me or do they have personal trainers on speed dial because there's definitely less than five to eight percent body fat on all those torsos. I don't know about Apple's corporate heads but I most definitely do *not* fit into these candy colored squares they've drawn out as their idealized customer. I have never been and probably never will be a single digit size,

thanks to my natural, gene-coded Latina curviness and my crippling, hip-splosive love for all things sugar dusted, malted, and whole milked. But I'll be damned if my iPod doesn't make me look like a baller, bobbing my head along to Pitchfork's latest editorial darlings from behind my ten-dollar wayfarer knockoffs. I Pod, therefore I am a lean, mean, dancing machine. I paid through the nose for it, so by definition it should magically envelop me in pure, unadulterated cool.

It's all part of an advertisement's core function: to sell something, be that product or fantasy or, ideally, *both*. What Apple's trying to sell me here isn't just a glorified portable hard drive with a delightful clicking wheel to sort through thousands of songs I might never get the chance to hear in their entirety. They're trying to sell me "cool," "hip," "stylish," and "edgy"—dime store descriptors for Madison Avenue concepts of street fashion couture—neatly packaged with their contemporary handheld boomboxes.

Almost everything people are meant to look at—advertisements, movie posters, even family vacation photos—is a carefully constructed package meant to deliver a controlled idea and meaning to an audience: the viewer. (I know my mom stink-eyed me into smiling very wide and standing very still next to some poor teen sweating for pocket money inside of a Robin Hood costume for our Disney World vacation photos: a composed image of summer Floridian family fun when all I wanted was to ride the teacups again and again to see if I really could throw-up like Cousin Paul said I would. Absolute lies—lies I would only condone by standing still.) Every last commercial, movie, even music video wants a viewer to take something away from it—something that a team of people sat down and discussed, storyboarded, designed, edited, and delivered to the viewer, its passive audience, for consumption. (My mom wanted everyone to "see" we had a grand old time at Disney World, and that never once was she mortified by my six-year old self flailing on the ground in screaming, crying, snot-faced rebellion against posing for pictures. By the power of Kodak, we sure as hell were going to *look* like a nice family having a nice time at the happiest place on earth, so help us Instamatic.)

This isn't to say Apple itself is a shadowy corporate organization with infinite, personal monetary gain but they do have bills to pay, I'm sure.

I try to figure out what exactly that Anonymous Team of Designers (read: Shadowy Corporate Organization with Infinite, Personal, Monetary Gain) had in mind for me by taking apart an image layer by layer: the subject, iconography (if there is any), colors and how they interact with each other, and composition, especially layout and perspective.

First, I consider what the subject of an image is: who or what is being focused on, like the noun of a sentence. A subject can turn into a proper noun for me depending on whether or not there's iconography—signs and

symbols, icons, referencing or alluding to other subjects, places, or things—that give it a deeper meaning or specific identity. I see the iPod ad banners as having two subjects—the iPod and the dancing silhouettes—with the iPod itself becoming an iconographic element because of how much attention it’s given compared to the anonymous silhouette: it’s a symbol of contemporary, luxurious, music technology. The anonymous silhouette holding the iPod then becomes the symbolic proprietor of the icon and the meanings associated with it: modernity, taste, a privileged social class. As a consumer, my owning an iPod associates me with this select group, or at least helps me *look* like I belong.

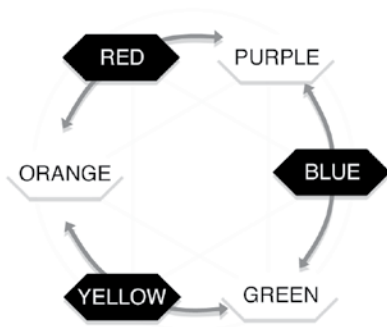


Fig 1 An innocent, helpful color wheel.

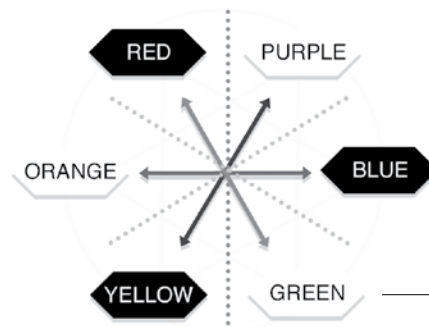


Fig 2 A sinister color wheel of DOOM.

Clearly this color wheel is only slightly evil as it's a budget friendly black-and-white wheel.

Next, I think about colors and how they work to get a good handle on what these ATDs (SCO with IPMG) want me to see/read. Remember the color wheel, and how neatly it shows how to mix the primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—to make secondary colors like orange, green, and purple to fill in coloring books with the whole rainbow, not just bits of it? Yeah, *that's* the rose-colored lens way I thought about it for years because I was a trusting, unassuming, gullible kindergartener when they got to me. But not anymore—at least not now that I've learned how advertisers turn it into something much more evil.

On the left is a standard color wheel with helpful arrows showing how to get from the primaries to the secondaries. On the right is a sinister color wheel revealing hidden design secrets that advertisers have guarded for centuries—*dun-dun-DUUUUUM!* The dotted line cutting into the middle separates the warm colors—red, orange, and yellow—on the left from the cool colors—purple, blue, and green—on the right. The dotted line also helps show analogous color groups: colors next to each other that match easily without clashing. The warm and cool trios make up two simple analogous sets, but really, any three colors side by side can make up a new set like the fainter diagonal crossbars show: red, purple, and blue match as well as orange, yellow, and green do.

Advertisers use this knowledge, to make visually appealing images but to make loud ones by using complementary contrasts—the colors directly across from each other on the color wheel—to draw a lot of attention in the middle of, usually, an analogously composed background. Apple’s early iPod ads skipped all this foreplay and stuck to solid, neon-colored backgrounds that do enough yelling on their own to grab consumer attention, using the silhouettes to highlight the one articulated image in their ads: the iPod with its patented, serpentine earbuds. But sometimes they would stack and grid a bunch of these seemingly simple iPod ads and the solid backgrounds would start playing off of each other to grab consumer attention: a bright pink background next to a lime green one that reinforced each other’s loudness, or an ad grid made up of mostly red, purple, and blue backgrounds with a bright yellow background ad in the middle of them all drawing the most attention to itself based on its proximity to the purple background.

Conspiracy? Not quite. (Yet.)

Apple’s ATDs have gotten really sneaky lately, using this not-particularly-forbidden color knowledge to play with consumer emotions and perceptions. The newer iPod ads have amped up the colors, using swirling chromatics to visually italicize, bold, and underline just how hard the silhouettes are jamming to their handheld idols. An ad could have a nice, warm, inviting color palette with sunshiney yellows, soft pale pinks, and citrusy oranges all splashing around together to entice the senses, leading a viewer’s eye from the edges of the banner towards the middle where they’re wrapping themselves around *WHAM*—a bright, cool lavender silhouette smack in the middle of this calculated color symphony, harshing its orchestrated Zen with a purposely “clashing” dancing figure to tap into baser, consumerist, want-need-must-buy-buy-buy-NOW instincts.

This controlled clashing is something I’ve noticed Apple’s ATDs have turned into a science: combining two or more analogous colors and offsetting them with the one complementary contrast to another in the original set to draw the most attention. They never use more than one set of complementary contrasts in one ad, playing it safe and tasteful by concentrating their efforts on the one combination: either yellow and purple, orange and blue, or red and green together, but never yellow and purple *and* orange and blue or red and green together—that would be tacky. I call this the Lakers/Gators/Christmas Paradox to both remember which ones go together and why two or more should never be in the same picture: it’s like trying to watch a Lakers or Gators game or *both* during the holidays—not gonna happen. It’s near impossible because the yellow and purple together will scream for my

attention as loud as orange and blue will, while red and green will demand I ignore both sets and make me have a bite of Abuelita's buñuelos whether I want to or not.

Almost lastly, I look at an image's composition, or layout—how figures and objects are placed to make up the picture—to help develop even more meaning. I think about how a story can be told through where things are placed either up close in the foreground, in the midground, or background of an image to illustrate the scene: is the focus on the subject or where the subject's placed, and does that focus on the setting say something more about the subject than the subject alone can? Other things I consider are the angles and patterns created through object placement: does everything fall into a horizontal line to create a connection between elements, are there vertical lines created to draw my attention up or down to other things I'm supposed to notice (or not) within the image, or are there diagonal lines made to communicate action or movement? Apple keeps it simple by drawing consumer eyes in with the loud neon colored backgrounds that their dancing silhouettes are contrasted against, which in turn draws attention to the more often than not diagonal lines created by the dancing figures to bring the most attention to the foreground where the iPod's placed ever so closest to the image's heart and, not coincidentally, the viewer, i.e. my shriveling savings account.

Accident? My pockets think not.

Lastly-lastly, I look at perspective—where the viewer stands in relation to an image—and how it can create an imaginary relationship between the ATDs' fantasy and my reality. Angles that make a viewer look up at a subject—whether created within the image's composition or its placement high up on a wall far and away from my blinding little eyes—create a visual metaphor of admiration on the viewer's part while angles looking down on the image emphasize the viewer's superiority or advantage over the subject's placement. Eye level perspectives, where the viewer and image stand on even ground, create a (false) sense of equality between the subject and observer.

Depending on where I've seen Apple's iconic iPod ads, the perspective can shift dramatically. In magazine print ads, I'm usually eye-to-eye with the images, making an intimate "I'm just like you, you should totally own an iPod too because we're just as cool as each other" connection between us. Even in stores the ads tend to be viewer-sized and viewer-leveled to highlight that friendly connection between image and viewer, giving me more reason to steer clear of Apple stores at the mall so I don't fall into abject poverty sooner than my college education would like.

Not that my Abuelita's buñuelos are a bad thing—I love buñuelos! It's delicious! Please don't stop sending me buñuelo care packages with pocket money to help me buy groceries every month! I love you, Abuelita!

But it's out on the town where I've seen it gets to be two very different kinds of weird that can be funny (or scary) when looking at street level paste-up ads and building-sized banners. The street level paste-up ads tend to be stuck up on the sides of a building wall at pedestrian level, but the fact that they're often pasted up and around and on top of each other to form a grid makes the ads look like they tower over the viewer, which tends to work against me and my slight-but-usually-almost-totally-negligible fear of people, places, and things trying to sell me things by subjecting their self-imposed taste-authority over my freedom to choose what I like and buy for myself, thank you very much, Apple. The building-sized banners do this too, although it seems by accident: they're usually placed on buildings by highways to be seen from cars, and from inside a car at a distance away they seem viewer-sized when I'm zipping by. But on the street from a pedestrian's perspective, the building-sized banners are massive and high up from the sidewalk, making the street-level viewer crane their neck to look up at the giant dancing silhouettes above them. It makes me end up feeling like the tiniest, insignificant little thing meant to worship the two-dimensional technology gods high up above me.

Who am I kidding?

Poorly thought out ad placement that interrupts a friendly, equalizing, eye level perspective pattern? Or, maybe, another attempt by Apple's ATDs to suck my pockets dryer than a Hoover?

MAYBE!

Maybe.

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Susana is a first year PhD student in English Studies. She currently only has 12,088 songs on her iPod, much to her audiophile heart's dismay. She hopes one day she'll meet the Ned the Piemaker to her Chuck Charles who'll win her heart with the scope of his own musical tastes found on his own equally overloaded modern boombox and his penchant for delightful, old timey romantic gestures. When she graduates, she hopes to use her hard-earned academic wisdom to live a nomadic life, traveling from city to state to country and back again by sailboat with Ponyboy, her puppy and tiny household dictator. Ponyboy hopes Susana's education ensures he'll be kept belly deep in rawhides and chew toys as befits the lifestyle he's grown accustomed to.

Genre Studies, Grice, and Burlesque

Jamison Lee

This article: (1) addresses North Carolina's drawls and frog abuses; (2) situates the Gricean maxims as a way to introduce the formal elements of genre studies; (3) explores the deliberate neglect of Gricean maxims and genre conventions in humor writing; and (4) extrapolates the importance—in all writing situations—of a keen awareness of these genre conventions.

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.

— E. B. White

In 1987, my family moved from Cleveland, Ohio, to Gastonia, North Carolina. We lived in this distant suburb of Charlotte for three years of my life, from first through fourth grade. I learned several things throughout those years: I learned that many words are, in the South, adorned with an extra syllable or at least pronounced quite differently from what I had been accustomed to in Ohio. (Sometimes, this was problematic on dictated spelling tests; “bell,” for instance, is not spelled “bale.”) I also learned how to roller skate; how to resist using the phrase, “y’all”; and how to dissect a frog, a free demonstration of which was provided by a young friend of mine whose identity I shall not reveal for reasons that will soon be apparent. My friend—let’s call him Peter and perhaps pronounce it, “Peta”—lived in the dusky woods near North Carolina’s southern border, so, naturally, we played outside very much during my visits. We spent our time tromping through the woods and riding his little four wheeler—this only after his dad got home, though,

because he had the ATV keys. In the evenings, we caught fireflies and made campfires. It was pastoral.

Catching and detaining fireflies, we'd shake the glass jars to make them light up more. Sometimes, we'd skip the capture and just hit them with tennis rackets—wiffle ball bats didn't work—to watch them flare up in the muggy darkness. I didn't like it when Peter took them out of the jar and squeezed them, but I never protested.

One blazing summer day, Peter showed me a frog he had caught. It was tied to a tree and had been there since late last night, he said. The color on its body was hard to identify, and its belly was beginning to rupture. I watched, horrified, as Peter dug his knee into the thin grass and excitedly explored the frog with his knife.

I hadn't yet been exposed to ethical philosophy (or genre studies), but I still felt it was wrong to dissect a living frog—especially noting in the activity's results a distinct lack of contribution toward *any* scientific end. Somehow, I wasn't able to utter a single protest as Peter's hands grew slimy and red with the gutting. And—according to E. B. White—as I felt then, so now shall you (to say nothing of the frog) as you read the rest of this essay. That is to say, hopefully, Peter became a research scientist; I, in any case, have not, and am only willing to dissect metaphorical frogs for the purposes of killing humor. I'll be gentle, I promise. And, contrary to Peter's unfortunate croaker, rest assured that *our* frog will have been sacrificed for a worthy exploration of comedy writing and genre studies.

Applying Gricean Maxims to Genre Studies

A couple years ago, I encountered a well-known component of the work of linguist H. P. Grice. Grice formulated the “cooperative principle,” including four main properties on which, he claimed, rational and productive conversation is based:

The maxims of **quality**:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of **relevance**:

1. Be relevant.

The maxims of **quantity**:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The maxims of **manner**:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

(“Rules of Conversation” 274-6)

While Grice’s maxims were originally conceived to ensure the practical productivity of conversations (“Rules of Conversation” 273), they can illuminate important components of written communication as well. Applying Grice’s maxims to traditional genres and writing situations can be a helpful way to elucidate the distinct features of the genre being examined. For the sake of illustration, I’ll extrapolate that claim.

The first maxim of quality advises that you don’t “say [or write] what you believe to be false,” while the second maxim of quality advises that you should “not say [or write] that for which you lack adequate evidence.” These maxims certainly appear to prescribe an upright prudence that would be quite useful in convincing one’s audience of her integrity (buttressing her ethos). However, as we might easily observe in the case (pun!) of a public defender whose task it is to argue on behalf of clients they may not wish to advocate, when the public defender writes her closing remarks, it may be her ethical duty to vehemently claim exactly that which she believes to be false and for which she lacks adequate evidence. Given this contrary fact, we can see how complicated this can get and, hence, how important it is to be hyper-aware of the genre conventions that exist within the rhetorical situation or genre in which one is assigned to work.

The case of relevance requires only one maxim: “Be relevant.” This concept seems transparent, its function easily understood in situations of both speaking and writing. Again, however, relevance is distinctly dependent on genre. Take the subject of food as an example. It seems easy to conjure relevant food-related information: serving size; nutritional value; descriptions of taste, texture, and color; list of ingredients; origin of ingredients; nature of preparation; etc. These are all pieces of information in which a consumer may viably be interested. However, the presentation of such information (where, when, and how it appears) deserves special consideration, as all marketing strategists know. Note that, while a detailed list of ingredients is quite relevant to the nutritional label of food at a grocery store, such details generally would be viewed as superfluous and irrelevant to the description of an item on a restaurant’s menu. And while we might be interested to know that McDonald’s oatmeal contains more calories than a Snickers bar (Bittman), calories from sugar is not information that one is likely to find on a menu because we seem to have tacitly decided that menus are not the place for such nutritional statistics

(and because such ill-timed reminders would presumably damage sales at many popular restaurants).

Grice's maxims regarding quantity basically advise us to say, or write, enough but not too much. This also seems fairly clear, but what does it look like in practice? Imagine, for instance, a greeting card. How long is it? How about a how-to manual for assembling a bookshelf? What about an article in a textbook? An autobiographical essay? Various writing situations entail varying levels of complexity. Without considering our purpose, audience, and other contextual factors, it can be very difficult to decide what is enough versus what is too much. Quantity is, therefore, arguably the Gricean component that is *most* dependent on context. Of course, in most English classes, students are consistently given length requirements on writing prompts; if not, we wonder: "How long does it have to be?" (Or, if we feel very tactful, we might inquire: "How long *would you like it* to be?") However, according to our exploration of Grice's quantity maxims, we can see that quantity is entirely dependent on the genre one has chosen to work in, and one's choice of genre is likely dependent on the intentions of her writing (i.e. what she wants her writing to communicate).

There are four maxims for *manner*. However, I would argue that one could cover all four by using easily accessible formats and simple language. George Orwell demonstrates the point, translating this Bible passage (Ecclesiastes 9:11): "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" into obscure, ambiguous, and verbose language: "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account" (qtd. in Pinker 251-2). While the translated passage, with its inflated academic language, may lure an undue respect from the reader, the original is more accessible and communicates its point more concisely, due to its simpler language and syntax.

As demonstrated, it can be illuminating to use Grice's maxims as a framework for analyzing a writing situation. Considering quality, relevance, quantity, and manner can serve as a straightforward way to help one discern the specific conventions of any genre, and to help one identify how she might revise her writing in order to accommodate certain genre conventions.

Imagine a business report that uses poetic language and ambiguous metaphors, or a ghost story that takes the form of a power point presentation; it's very important to note the unlikelihood that readers will take seriously a text which doesn't adhere to standard genre conventions. However, not all

writing is meant to be taken seriously, and “[s]ometimes people violate the maxims on purpose” (“Rules of Conversation” 277). I think it will be fun and helpful to see the farce—intentional or otherwise—that can occur when genre conventions are thoroughly violated. Let’s focus, then, on intentional genre violations as a way to generate comic writing.

Grice and Burlesque

One genre in which violating Gricean maxims is completely acceptable is “Burlesque” (a.k.a. “Parody”). Burlesque is “a type of comedy in which distortion and exaggeration are employed to ridicule and deflate, either through the trivialization of a lofty subject or through the glorification of a lowly or commonplace one. Humor results from the disparity between subject and style” (Murfin and Supryia 46). Successful writers of burlesque and parody trounce Grice’s maxims, as they deliberately provide information unfit for the genre they are mocking. It is assumed that the reader’s intuitive knowledge of the genre’s conventions will allow her to recognize the author’s playful intentions. As Isabel Ermida puts it, “[T]he proficient reader is expected to know how to solve the puzzle and enjoy the ensuing comic pleasure” (235). Here, the “proficient reader” is one who is aware of the genre’s traditional conventions.

I have made a move toward parody in writing my author’s bio for this textbook. And I am willing to bet that you, the proficient reader, when first encountering this bio, intuited that something was amiss. Of course, explaining the specific incongruity with much precision would have been difficult initially. In the first reading of a text, one usually achieves a basic comprehension, rather than a nuanced analysis of form or style. (Initial readings of French theorists produce only profound agitation). Reading a second time, through the Gricean lens, you may notice that, while the quality and quantity are debatably well-suited for the author bio genre, surely the relevance and manner—in large part—are not.

A more thoroughly developed example of burlesque writing is Steve Martin’s “Side Effects,” which functions as a parody of the lists of side effects usually found on pharmaceutical drugs’ labels. The instructions for Martin’s fictional drug advise, “Take two tablets every six hours for joint pain” (55). Following this is the inordinately long and absurd list of side effects, which violates perhaps all four of Grice’s maxims:

Side Effects: This drug may cause joint pain, nausea, headache, or shortness of breath. You may also experience muscle aches, rapid heartbeat, or ringing in the ears. If you feel faint, call your doctor.

Do not consume alcohol while taking this pill; likewise, avoid red meat, shellfish, and vegetables. Okay foods: flounder. Under no circumstances eat yak. Men can expect painful urination while sitting, especially if the penis is caught between the toilet seat and the bowl. Projectile vomiting is common in 30 percent of users—sorry: 50 percent.... (55)

This bizarrely robust list continues well into the next few pages, far outreaching our normal expectations of what constitutes a reasonable *quantity* of side effects on a drug's warning label. The author impugns the maxims of *quality* and *manner* with his flippant, conversational tone in correcting the statistical error, "30 percent of users—sorry: 50 percent." This faux pas causes us to question the care taken (and, hence, the truthiness) in preparing the information we're receiving in this list of side effects. Additionally, the manner (referring specifically to concision and clarity) of the previous statement is amiss. Rather than erasing the statistical error, the writer has sort of sloppily "drawn over" it; this creates unnecessary clutter in the passage and causes his meaning to be ambiguous and potentially obscure for the reader. Finally, the overall *relevance* of the author's cautionary counsel comes under suspicion, as he explains that "[m]en can expect painful urination while sitting, especially if the penis is caught between the toilet seat and the bowl." The obviousness of this penis-related detail makes it redundant and, hopefully, irrelevant to the user's circumstance.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that awareness of genre is indispensable for writers of serious *and* humorous texts. Comedy writers often deliberately breach genre parameters in order to mock the genre in which they're writing. These exaggerated subversions of genre can create texts so absurd that they aren't taken seriously. And if violating genre conventions can completely invert the reception of a text, consider the dreadful results of a writer or speaker who *accidentally* violates these conventions.

Technological innovations and pop culture references are far more welcome than they used to be in most contemporary communications situations. In fact, their prevalent presence in commercials has become so common, the genre so deeply ingrained, that we are also able to recognize parodies of it. For instance, Geico—commonly associated with its iconic talking lizard—has recently used the website, Xtranormal, to create a few car insurance commercials. (Xtranormal.com offers a template so that amateurs can create basic animated sequences.) The commercials' animation is poor, and the voices are lifelessly digitized, causing a bizarre experience for the

viewer as she encounters a deliberately clumsy approach to advertising a product that is arguably more deserving of serious treatment than many other products whose commercials employ similar techniques of parody—e.g., beer, deodorant, clothing. (If read as an example of burlesque, one can see that the clumsy, animated *style* of Geico’s Xtranormal commercials do not match the gravity of their product, or *subject*.) Given television advertising’s widespread use of humorous appeals, Geico’s parody of the genre is perhaps less than daring, particularly as the frequent use of these techniques indicates that they must succeed, somehow, in effectively persuading their target demographics. But imagine employment of Xtranormal in other presentations: law enforcement officials using Xtranormal as training supplements in police academies, or detectives using Xtranormal to recreate a crime scene. In these scenarios, such applications of multimedia fail to convey important, detailed information; additionally, they lampoon the importance of the subjects and the significance of the communicators’ goals. Perhaps these are exaggerated examples, but even smaller genre deviations can appear highly conspicuous to those who are very familiar with the given genre. Certainly, then, a writer who means to make a serious inquiry, compose a persuasive piece, or engage in any crucial writing activity should be equally, if not more, aware of her genre’s conventions.

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In rural houses of the rich and semi-famous, the American Idol girl has her grandma's picture on the piano, next to it a jar of the old woman's menstrual blood. An invasive species, a super-food, eighty Illinois autumn berries wait in a different jar and rot, growing mold. **Jamison Lee** is a doctoral student at Illinois State University.

Researching One in Six Million

Hilary Selznick

This article explores the research methods used in a book-length memoir. More specifically, I address how the research involved in writing a memoir about my grandmother's history as a Holocaust survivor differs from the research strategies I learned as an undergraduate student writing a research paper. Instead of concentrating on a controversial topic or issue, the focus in memoir writing is on the personal. I used mostly primary research methods in order to retrace my grandmother's history, including: interviews, archival research, and searching old photo albums and regulatory documents. Although secondary research, which included the searching of library databases, was useful, primary research was more necessary for my memoir. Through this process, I came to the conclusion that the genre of the research project dictates which research methods will be most effective.

It has been almost twenty years since we buried my grandmother under a large maple tree. I like to think she is happy there, returned back to the earth and to the husband she had loved, who died nearly thirty years before her.

My grandmother was a difficult woman: rough mannered, quick-tempered, and angry at life. She was overly critical. She could be mean and hurtful. My father resented her, my sister feared her, and for some unexplainable reason, I was wildly in love with her. Maybe it was because my mother often told me that I reminded her of all the good parts of my grandmother.

In my writing, my grandmother always showed up—uninvited. She found her way into the lines of my poetry, the characters of my fiction, and recently there she was again, smack in the middle of the memoir I thought I was writing about my own life. Finally, I gave in and realized that in order to tell my own story I had to first tell my grandmother's.

I began with my mother. Surely my mother could tell me all the things I wanted to know about my grandmother's history. I knew only a little: she

survived the Holocaust by somehow managing to escape a concentration camp and board an illegal ship to Russia carrying other Jewish escapees; she married a handsome Polish soldier; and gave birth to my mother after the war in the U.S. Occupied Zone of Germany. But it wasn't enough. What happened to her in between those events, and how did those events turn her into the person I would meet years later?

I called my mother and prepared to ask her a ton of questions. Next to me sat a thick pad of legal paper and a fountain pen. She answered the phone in her typical manner: "Is this my daughter who left me to live in Michigan?" she said.

"Yes, mother that's the one," I sighed. "I'm calling because I want to know more about Bubby."

"What do you want to know?" she asked. The sound of what must be pages of newspaper crackled into the phone.

"Um, what concentration camp was she in? Who helped her escape? How did she meet grandfather? What did she do in Russia? What happened to the rest of her family?" I said quickly, momentarily forgetting the importance of breathing.

"I already told you everything I know," my mother said flatly. Okay, so I might have asked her these questions before, but this time I was looking for a different answer, a better answer. "Didn't you ever ask her any questions?" I urged.

"She didn't want to talk about it," my mother said loudly into the phone. I guess she thought her words would have more meaning if she shouted them.

"I think I'm going to do some research," I said, excitement rising into my voice. I grabbed the fountain pen hard and plopped it loudly onto the pad.

"Fine," my mother replied, more newspaper rustling. "But if you ask me, it's a waste of time."

* * *

My excitement waned when I realized I had no idea how to do research on my grandmother. The only time I did research was in school and I knew that researching for a memoir had to be different. I wasn't arguing a topic or analyzing a piece of literature; instead, I was trying to uncover a life and to find something that might explain the connection I felt with my grandmother.

My first instinct was to search Google. But what would I type into the search bar? My grandmother's name? Holocaust Survivors? Victims of World

War II? I knew none of these searches would work. My grandmother's name was spelled various ways in many different languages and she wasn't someone famous. Holocaust Survivors was so broad of a search that it came up with approximately 870,000 hits on Google. I recently read the amazingly brilliant memoir and Holocaust studies book *The Lost: Searching for Six in Six Million*, by journalist Daniel Mendelsohn and remembered that he talked about his research process in the book.

I found *The Lost* on one of my bookshelves and took it down. I started to read my underlined notes and came across the line that said it took Mendelsohn nineteen years to research and write his book. I was immediately distressed. Nineteen years! I didn't have nineteen years! Who had time to write a book for nineteen years! I decided to read on anyway. Mendelsohn went on to explain that for most of those nineteen years the Internet wasn't invented yet, and that once it was his search went much faster. Ok, so maybe there was still hope. He said he began his research process by looking at primary sources, including: historical records, old photographs, interviews, and an extended visit to the Polish town his uncle and his uncle's children lived in before the Holocaust. Then he wrote letters, made long distance phone calls, and eventually searched the Internet. I decided to follow by example. Unfortunately, that meant another call to mom.

"Fine," my mother said distractedly, "I'll have your father go into the basement and look for grandmother's photo albums. But I have to warn you, most of the pages are torn and some of the pictures fell out of their pockets."

"Yes, mother," I replied. I heard the sound of the TV in the background and I felt exasperated that my mother was giving me only half of her attention. "Mom!" I screamed into the phone. "What about documents? Don't you have any of grandmother's papers left?"

"There is a small file box in the back bedroom," she said, "I'll get your father to look for it."

I made plans to fly to Philadelphia to see things for myself. My dad handed me the small metal file box and tears formed in my eyes as I thought about how sad it was for a whole life to be reduced to a tiny box. Inside was my grandfather's death certificate, both my grandparent's naturalization papers, a marriage license written in Polish, some financial papers, and a German identification card with a snapshot of my grandfather's face. The letters UNRRA were stamped onto the card and the word Liephem appeared at the top. My mother didn't know what the letters stood for, but she thought Liephem was the refugee camp she was born in. I asked my father to make me photocopies of the papers so I could take them back to Michigan with me and get them translated.

Next, we looked through the old photo album. My mother emptied the contents of the plastic bag my father brought up from the basement and out fell loose black and white photographs and empty envelopes. The black felt paper stuck to the back of most of the photos in the album covering the descriptions on the backs. My mother talked me through the pictures she recognized: one was of a party where a crowd of people were smiling at the photographer. "I think this was taken at a wedding. The small bald man in the corner is your Uncle Hyman," she said as she squinted through her glasses. "He was your grandparent's sponsor and your father and I named you after him." I looked down at my great-uncle and felt a rush of emotions, mostly gratitude for the man who saved my grandparent's lives by bringing them to America and into his home.

There were plenty of photographs. I saw my grandmother in her twenties, thirties, forties. She was smiling and youthful. She looked nothing like the gray-haired woman I grew up with, the one full of anger and weakened by cancer. In most of the pictures there were posed groups of people. My grandfather gathered together with a sea of other men wearing police uniforms, women gathered around a water well, men and women around a dining room table enjoying the food in front of them. But, there were no children. I found a picture of my Bubby in a wedding gown, the handsome man with the arm around her was my grandfather looking smart in his police uniform, and a crowd of friends smiling in the background. The happy event almost made it possible to ignore the lines on the guest's faces, their thin bodies showing through their ill-fitting clothing, the loss that they never talked about.

My mother and I managed to find some pictures with dates and places on them. Most of the descriptions on the backs of the photos were written in Hebrew. I told my mother I wished I paid more attention in Hebrew school and she said so did she. Before giving the photo album back to my father, I slipped the picture of my grandmother's wedding into a yellowed envelope along with a few others where she seemed happy. I would return to these photos over and over again through the years when I felt like giving up, when the research became much harder than I ever expected.

* * *

After looking at the photos, I wasn't sure what to do next. I decided to go to the Free Library of Philadelphia downtown and look through the catalog and some databases. I took a stack of books off the shelves and sat with them for hours at a table. I looked at the annotated bibliographies at the end of articles. One led me to the book *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany*. The book listed all of the displaced person camps including Liephem. It explained that the letters UNRRA found on my

grandparents' pictures stood for the United Nation's Refugee Rehabilitation Association that oversaw the DP camps and it led me to another organization, JDR: the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee that fed and clothed the refugees in the camps. For the first time, this book gave me the opportunity to see what my grandmother's life was like all those years earlier and helped me to understand the cause of so much of her anger and suffering. My love for her grew stronger.

At times, none of the research techniques I used worked. Emails saying I am sorry but I cannot help you, calls left unreturned, the archive search at the JDR in New York City turned up empty. And I couldn't find any of my grandparents' family members on the famous Israeli Museum, Yad Vashem's Shoah Victims' Database. But then good news came. Bits of information came from unexpected places. A year after I filed my request for information about my grandparents, emails came from the Holocaust Survivors and Victims' Resource Center at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.: nineteen documents listing my grandmother's name and fourteen for my grandfather. Among the PDFs they sent was a list of persons, including my grandparents, who were registered at Leipheim DP Camp as of April 29, 1947; a list of persons who emigrated from Bremerhaven, Germany, to New York, USA on November 14, 1949; and a list of survivors of Warsaw with my grandparents' names found through the International Tracking Services in Bad Arolsen, Germany in 1947. My hands shook every time I received an email. The excitement and relief of seeing my grandmother's name refuelled my search.

There is still so much more to do. I need to find a translator for all these documents, I still haven't found the name of the concentration camp my Bubby escaped from, and I need to find grant money to make a trip to Yad Vashem in Israel and to Warsaw to search for the place my grandmother called home. But I can't tell you how good it felt to send my mother these missing pieces of her parents' lives. And when I called her to tell her that I found the name of her grandmother, the woman she never knew she was named after, she thanked me for the first time in my life for not following her advice.



Hilary Selznick is originally from Philadelphia where she ate yummy cheesesteaks with Cheez Whiz, snacked on Amish soft-pretzels, and ran up the art museum stairs like Rocky. She had been living in Michigan for five years with her husband and two step-children and is still struggling with being a Midwesterner. For example, she never seems to locate Kalamazoo on her hand, which seems to be the main form of communication between Michiganders. Hilary recently started her PhD program in English Studies at Illinois State University in the town of Normal. This has caused much laughter in her family and leaves Hilary to question why every town she moves to makes for great T-shirt slogans. Hilary earned her MFA from Western Michigan University in creative nonfiction where she taught first-year writing for three years. Prior to Western, Hilary received a Masters in Education and taught grade school where she zippered coats and lined up girls to take them to the bathroom. She is currently working on a full-length memoir about her grandmother's history as a Holocaust survivor.

Our Mission Statement

The *GWRJ* is dedicated to publishing work by writers and scholars whose work investigates the practices of people writing (and acting) in different writing situations. We encourage both individuals and groups to submit work that studies and explores the different ways that writers learn how to write for different genres and in different settings, not just within the boundaries of academia, but in all kinds of settings where writing happens. Because we identify as “writing research” any type of composition that endeavors to uncover new information about how people work with writing, or how writing works, a wide range of techniques and styles of writing might be applicable: For example, a first person narrative, an informal conversation about writing, a formal study of writing, or even an artistic production might all be useful techniques for developing a *GWRJ* article. However, accepted articles will be informed by either primary research into writing behaviors and activities and/or by scholarship in the field of writing studies that addresses theories of how people learn to compose in different situations.

Submissions

Articles can be submitted to the *GWRJ* at any time, although we do have deadlines for responding to work and selecting articles for upcoming issues (see next page). Contact the Associate Editor, Kristi McDuffie <kristimcduffie@gmail.com> to submit your work, or with queries about possible submissions.

Queries and Drafts: The *GWRJ* has a strong commitment to working with interested authors to help them to prepare for publication. So if you have what you think might be a good idea, but you are not sure how to proceed, please contact us.

Deadlines

Although articles, queries, and drafts can be submitted at any time, these are the production deadlines for the Production 3.1 & 3.2 issues.

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| Wednesday, February 1st, 2012 | For priority consideration for the <i>GWRJ</i> , Spring 2012 (3.2), drafts must be received by this date. |
| Thursday, March 15th, 2012 | Authors will submit final drafts for the Fall 2012 issue of the <i>GWRJ</i> (3.1) |
| Sunday, April 15th, 2012 | Authors will submit final drafts for the Spring 2012 issue of the <i>GWRJ</i> (3.2) |

Citation

GWRJ articles should always provide citations for published works that are mentioned. However, in keeping with our flexible and open consideration of the term “scholarship,” we do not stipulate for a specific style of citation for articles. While some *GWRJ* articles will lend themselves to one of the common academic citation styles, other articles may use simple footnotes for important citation information, or use a more journalistic style of citation. However, all published texts (scholarship, works of art, etc.) referenced in any *GWRJ* article must be cited in some way that allows readers to refer to the cited work. Additionally, any primary research into the composing practices of individuals and groups must have appropriate permissions in order to be published (usually, this means having participants sign a consent form that we provide).

Style & Tone

Because we encourage so many different kinds of textual production and research in the *GWRJ*, issues of appropriate style and tone can be complicated. However, we can offer some basic style criteria for authors to consider:

1. The readership of the *GWRJ* is **writers**. It is not “students,” or “ENG 101 students.” *GWRJ* articles should attempt to provide valuable content to writers who are engaged in the activity of “learning how to learn about” genres. Our readers may be ISU students, staff, or faculty, but they might also be members of the wider Bloomington-Normal community or beyond.
2. “Teacher Narratives” are not acceptable as *GWRJ* articles. We are interested in material that looks at literate activities from the position of a “writer” or a “researcher,” but articles that discuss ways to “teach” people about writing are not appropriate for this journal.
3. However, many of our readers are both writers and students at ISU (in either ENG 145 or ENG 101). This means that articles that focus on learning that happens in school are considered appropriate (see the section on “School and Society” for more information).
4. Language and style that is overly formal or “academic” may be difficult or unappealing to our readers.
5. A tone that situates the author as a “master” writer is often problematic (we call these “success” narratives, which are often how-to type articles, where the focus is on the author’s learned expertise). Authors need to be careful to remember that no one “learns” a genre completely or in a completely simple way. So while writers (especially of first-person narratives) may write about successes, they need to problematize the genres with which they are working.
6. A tone/content that situates the reader as a certain kind of writer (whether master or novice), with certain kinds of shared experiences, can be problematic.
7. Whenever possible, articles should make use of published research about writing practices, but the tone/style for including such research needs to focus on simple explanations that are relevant and useful to “non-scholarly” readers.
8. Articles are usually not strictly theoretical—while theoretical perspectives are useful, it’s important for authors to think about how to make the theories applicable (in practical ways) to our readers.
9. Articles should be as specific as possible about the genre or set of writing activities they are studying. Generalized studies or discussions of “writing” are not encouraged. Additionally, examples of “writing-in-progress” are always encouraged, and are often necessary for articles to be useful to our readers.

Subject Matter

Almost any type of situation where texts are being conceived, produced, and used could potentially be an appropriate topic for a *GWRJ* article. Examples of genres that could be studied can be found almost anywhere—and when authors consider the situations and activities in which genres are produced/distributed/used, the possible range of subjects and situations become almost infinitely variable. Focusing topics as narrowly as possible can be useful, and direct experience with (or observation of) certain kinds of writing situations tends to be a good way to narrow an article’s focus. Thus Amy Hick’s article on playlists, “Scroll-Point-and-Click Composition?” (Vol. 2.1, pp 25-30) is an excellent example of a fairly narrow genre that is nevertheless interesting and complex. Authors might also investigate a rhetorical effect or strategy, or particular textual practice that extends across genres (these can be fascinating articles) but keeping these *narrowly* defined can be more difficult.

Media, Mode, & Copyright Issues

The *GWRJ* can publish both visual and digital texts. We encourage multimodal texts, including still images, audio, video, and hypertexts. However, authors working in these technologies need to be very careful about copyright issues, as we cannot publish any kinds of materials that may result in a copyright infringement. We can sometimes seek copyright permissions, but in the case of materials such as works of art or graphics/images owned by large companies, this is often not possible. This is true for print-based articles that use images as well. Also, video/audio of subjects can require special kinds of permission processes. So you should contact the *GWRJ* editors before beginning this kind of work. Research using subjects who are considered “protected” populations (people under 18, people with mental disabilities, among others) are not acceptable for *GWRJ* articles unless the author has received approval from Illinois State University (or other institution) for Human Subjects research.

Honoraria

The *GWRJ* offers an honorarium to each author whose article is published in a print issue of the *GWRJ*. These honoraria are for \$50.00 and are limited to the print edition [Note: *GWRJ* may publish multimodal pieces, which will be “introduced” in the print edition, and provided with a link to where the sites are housed on our server. These multimodal pieces would also be eligible

for an honorarium]. In addition to the print edition, we are also beginning to publish an archive of “*GWRJ* writing research” articles, which may include articles in addition to those featured in our print issues. Authors may be invited to submit their work to this archive, which would still be considered a publication in the journal, but would not include an honorarium payment.

Research in School & Society

Many of the genres that are assigned in our classrooms at ISU might be interesting as the subject of study—keeping in mind that even among classrooms in the same department there might be wide variations among genre expectations and requirements. Other kinds of social communications that happen throughout university settings (like emails between instructors and students, or documents created by social groups on campus) might be interesting as well. *GWRJ* is particularly interested in studies of “research genres” (genres that use primary or secondary research as a core component), partly because we want to challenge the notion that “research papers” are a coherent genre, and partly because we know that “researched writing” is a type of literate activity that is very important to the mission and goals of universities, including ISU. However, we are also interested in research studies related to many other kinds of genres that can be found at ISU. The same is true for genres outside of the university—almost any genres could potentially be interesting as the subject of study, remembering that specificity is key to developing a useful and interesting articles.

Personal Narrative (or not?)

A review of our current and archived articles reveals that many of our existing articles are written in a personal tone (that is, they use “I” and include personal stories and experiences). Some of our articles are actually “personal narratives” (with a clear relationship to genres such a memoir or creative non-fiction). For example, Hilary Selznik’s article “Researching one in Six Million,” (Vol. 2.1, pp. 83-88), is very similar to a creative non-fiction story in many ways. Although we do encourage a relatively informal register for all articles, and while we are happy to publish personal narratives about writing experiences, we do want to stress that articles need not be written as first-person accounts, nor do they need to be written only about the author’s experiences. Studies of the writing of others are equally important work that relates a single, personal perspective, and *GWRJ* would like to encourage writing research that looks beyond the personal.

