CHATting 'Bout Chats

Brooke Evans

In this article, Evans researches the connections between the ways we have communicated throughout history, attempting to figure out how these different genres might be related. She theorizes that the telegram and text messages might be part of the same genre family (maybe even genre siblings) then interviews her teacher, Mrs. Kieffer, to get her take on this.

Ughhh, I just started eighth grade, it's the second day, and I'm sitting in Advanced ELA class, which I don't really feel like I belong in. I mean I can read really well . . . but writing? Yesterday, Mrs. Kieffer asked us to describe ourselves as writing researchers. What is THAT? And now she is talking about this weird thing called CHAT and Twitter being a genre. I mean, I'm not sure what exactly Twitter is . . . and now I have to write this thing called a tweet. Either she has a few screws loose, or I do. Next she is talking about texting being a genre. Great, I'm the worst at texting. OK, so this "CHAT" thing can be broken up into seven to eight parts. Why do they call it cultural-historical activity theory? I mean where does the culture and history part come from? And isn't ecology the study . . . of plants? WHAT THE HECK? Everybody else looks like they got it . . . there has to be something I'm missing. Wait. Think Brooke. Is there something similar I can compare it to . . . Hmmmm . . . It's gonna be a long year.

"With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts," (BrainyQuote). These were my thoughts the first time I ever experienced CHAT, and I have to say I just kinda sat there dumbfounded as Mrs. Kieffer began introducing us to CHAT. I remember sitting in class, and not having a clue as to what she was saying. I'm the type of person who takes everything literally. (This can make things awkward when you try to explain to your friends that screwing

your head on so you can't lose it would, at the very least, paralyze you from the neck down). Plus, when people began to nod their heads saying yeah they got it (all kids at school do this whether they've got it or not), I felt like I was missing something.

The first thing Mrs. Kieffer had to squeeze into my naive world, was that EVERYTHING is a genre. My brain sorta blew up. Our main lesson was on the conventions of texting and Twitter, only we used the word "rule" because our brains were still in the tropics tanning on a beach in the Bahamas. I should mention another thing about my style in life (and writing because everybody has a style of writing). Along with being very literal, I have a great memory and can sometimes connect dots in really weird ways. I'll be sitting in class, and the next thing you know I'll ask a crazy question. For example, in Science we were doing an experiment, and, well, one thing led to another and I asked a question: "If hydrochloric acid can burn through aluminum, then why don't we just use it to get rid of all the garbage in the world?" *(Before you go and petition at your town hall to use hydrochloric acid on garbage, turns out it's bad for the environment. It can cause acid rain, smog, and can eat through limestone.)* Sometimes I just say things out of left field, *OK* a lot of the time.

When we started talking about the "rules" of genres, I connected some pretty weird dots. A map of my thoughts led to my conclusion. I thought about texting and how sometimes people don't use a period. Then, I thought about what came before the text, which led to a Boxcar children's book *(awesome kids' books)*. In one of the books, the characters are on a canoe trip to find a hermit *(weird, I know, but authors have to sell books to make money somehow)*. They sent their grandfather a telegram to let him know they were coming home. To end the telegram the word "STOP" was used instead of a period. *"That's it!"* my brain screamed at me, telegrams were like texts *(I said it was a weird connection)*. I raised my hand for the first time in Mrs. Kieffer's class *(I usually raise my hand every five minutes)* and asked, "So is a telegram like a text?" I expected a nice *"wrong"* and then a fairly long explanation of why. Instead, Mrs. Kieffer thought my idea was really cool, and threw a whole new term, antecedent genre knowledge, in my face and told me Dr. Walker would be proud.

OoooK. What does antecedent even mean? How in the world do you spell that anyway? Ummm it starts with "ant," like the cute little insects, unless they are fire ants. There seems to be just a lowercase "a" sound as well. Then it sounds like it has "seed" like succeed, and an "ent"—antaseedent. I feel like I'm spelling that wrong. Oh, come on, I spell everything wrong. OK, so if ecology is the study of plants and antaseedant has "seed" in it, well maybe it's a plant term? Or it could be about ants. But what in the world does writing have to do with plants? Or ants for that matter. I'm fairly sure there is no form of text in or on plants, or ants. And who is Dr. Walker?

So all that happened in August, and some time passed. We flew through the year fast. A memoir, memo, grant, a book project or two, grant projects, and then we reached March. Mrs. Kieffer had been teaching us all year, and I felt like I could do this. I was ready, more or less, to write this article. Problem was I had no idea what to write about.

It's March and I think I have a good hold on CHAT, but I have to choose a topic for my Grassroots article, but what? What topic could I focus in on? History might be good because I won't have as hard a time writing on that topic. But what to write about? Come on, Brooke, do you know how big history is? 2000 words? I could write 2000 PAGES. I could write on so many things like Nazis, concentration camps, civil wars, Stalin. But wait, this is supposed to be about writing. OK, narrow it down, maybe something that I have already thought of? Hmmmmmmm . . . THE TELEGRAM!!!! It's basically a really old text message. I could compare like I did in August. But is there a solid evolutionary link between them? The telephone!!! Telephones and texting are very similar; they practically evolved from one another. Right? Hmmmmm . . . I think WAY too much.

I think the best way to sum up why knowing the history of something is important comes from George Santayana, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" *(Wikiquote)*. So began my secondary research. I didn't want to use just the Internet, but I went to a public school. It's not like I had tons of books about telegraphs at the ready. But I did have Mrs. Kieffer. She showed me a book or two that I might consider using, which really helped. As a quick clarification, before I began my research, I used the terms telegraph and telegram interchangeably. Turns out they aren't just two interchangeable words that mean the same thing. The telegraph refers to the device that sends and receives telegrams—the actual message being sent and received.

Before the telegraph, it was like there were very little ways to communicate. Unless you felt like running to and fro or riding horses. Or used the famous carrier pigeons that we drove to extinction. Ancient civilizations sometimes used smoke symbols and drumbeats to communicate (Morse Code and the Telegraph). Unfortunately, due to sight affecting weather, these tools were limited. *(I was surprised by how creative ancient civilizations could be. You learn a little every day. Honestly, why do we always talk about ancient China, Greece, Rome, and Egypt when talking about ancient civilization? Why not talk about ancient Mongols? . . . OK, I googled them; I'm beginning to see why we stick to those few.)* But these tactics weren't the most reliable. Often, if there was disruptive weather these tools would be useless. (Which would be bad if you were stupid and brought a Trojan horse into your base, and you had no way to tell anyone else.) Then Samuel Finley Breese Morse *(why do people need two middle names?)* strode down to Capitol Hill with an

idea that is revolutionary, the telegraph. The telegraph, according to the article "Morse Code and the Telegraph," was a messaging system that used Morse code to transmit messages to long-distance places. Morse code is a system of dashes and dots that represent different letters. I then had a thought, *wasn't SOS a telegraph thing*, I mean it would fit the time frame in history. Turns out, SOS, the international distress symbol, doesn't actually stand for anything. *(What would it stand for? Save Other Ships? Ummm . . . I believe you are the one wanting saving?)* It was chosen because of how easy it is to send by Morse code (S is three dots, and O is three dashes—"…///…"). Eventually after what scientifically can be thought of as waiting at the DMV for a long time, Samuel Morse was successful. Finally, on May 24, 1844, Samuel Morse sent the world's first telegram from Washington DC to Baltimore, Maryland, where his partner, Vail, received it (Morse Code and the Telegraph). The words that changed the world (Figure 1) are very fitting, "What hath God wrought!" (Morse 1). *(Sounds kinda like Shakespeare)*.

Figure 1: Image of the first telegraph message, "What hath God wrought."

But those two fine inventors didn't invent the telegraph all by themselves! Many others knowingly and unknowingly helped with the creation. The first few websites I checked out didn't even mention them; I had to dig deeper into the web of information. One honorable mention that I discovered was: "Italian physicist Alessandro Volta (1745–1827) [who] invented the battery" (Morse Code and the Telegraph). Without this person, it would have never happened. *(There is some trajectory for you)*. But after the telegraph was invented, others also helped with improving this revolutionary machine. Ezra Cornell (1807–1874) invented insulated wires, (which is probably good if you want wires to cross the Atlantic). After some time, and the hype had worn off; the telegraph began to be overshadowed by new inventions (Morse Code and the Telegraph).

OK, you're just waiting for me to start talking about the telephone, something that existed when you were, you know, alive. (This depends on how old you are, so the baby boomers, Generation X, millennials [Generation Y], Generation Z, or, as [I have chosen to call my age group] the emojiers, have probably never seen a telegraph, besides in museums). But allow me to correct you and explain that, the telegraph is still used today, though it is fastly fading into the sunset. While doing research on the telegraph, I came across an article online done by the History Channel. I love their web page, and I'm kinda biased because they are one of the first places I go for historical information.

According to the article on the History Channel website by Sarah Pruitt titled, "The End of an Era," in July 2013 India shut down its telegraph services. According to this source, the "Taar" as the telegraph is called in India, began to decline in the 1960s with the rise of the modern technological era. India had been using the telegraph for almost 110 years since it first came to the country in 1850 (Pruitt). I was kinda surprised that India had continued to use the telegraph so long. I know there are rural areas in the country, but they are pretty advanced, and it's the second biggest country by population. Anyways, the company that runs the telegraph services has been struggling to turn a profit for some time and decided to stop sending and receiving telegrams. *(I suppose that would be a bad investment these days)*. This is a problem for people in rural India, though, because Internet and phone service is expensive, and poorer areas can't afford these modern conveniences. These places are poor and often don't have clean drinking water (Pruitt). *(Also they have crocodiles and child labor)*.

But India isn't just "not with the times," as I said earlier, they are pretty advanced. Many countries still use the telegraph, "India is only the latest country to bid goodbye to the telegram. Western Union, [was] the dominant telegraph company in the United States since its founding in 1856 . . . In 2006, the company shut down its telegraph services for good" (Pruitt). *(So I could have sent telegrams in preschool.)* So the telegraph is dying, but it is still used is many places today.

Another thing worth mentioning is, it took time for the invention of the telephone to spread, especially in a war-torn Europe. Even the most surprising of people, Adolf Hitler, used the telegram. *(Though I guess he had to communicate somehow)*. I learned this while reading this historical book Mrs. Kieffer gave me. The book said that: "Late in 1942 Adolf Hitler sent Denmark's king, Christian X, a warm, personal telegram congratulating the king on his seventy-second birthday. The king replied with a mere, 'My utmost thanks, [signed] Christopher Rex' (Hoose 126). Let's just say Hitler was kinda upset, even though he was considered one of the most evil people in the world.

According to Hoose, "Enraged, the fürher immediately recalled his ambassador from Copenhagen and expelled the Danish ambassador from Germany. Hitler moved Werner Best, a dedicated Nazi and Gestapo member, to Copenhagen as the high commander of Denmark" (Hoose 126). *(Yeah, Hitler was a little upset with Denmark and the king. I think there was a slight reception error there. Or not, maybe the king just really didn't like Hitler? [Werner Best actually was in my opinion, the "Best" Nazi because he basically let 6,500 of 7,000 Jews who were meant to be sent to death camps escape to Sweden, a neutral country].)* But, anyways, telegrams didn't die out immediately—it took some time before they began to decline.

Onward to our next link in the chain, the telephone. Its origin, and solo creator is fairly famous. According to *History.com*, "Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922), the Scottish-born American scientist best known as the inventor of the telephone, worked at a school for the deaf while attempting to invent a machine that would transmit sound by electricity" ("Alexander Graham Bell"). In March 1876, Bell was granted the first telephone patent ("Alexander Graham Bell"). While Bell might have invented the telephone, he, if anything, wanted to be remembered as a simple teacher of the deaf. *(I think reception changes how you see him. I didn't know he invented the telephone until later. I knew him from the story of Helen Keller, though he wasn't that simple).* Bell revolutionized the way people who are deaf are taught and treated. But he was also was definitely a zeg-style scientist. Zeg is the Georgian (the country, wedged between Russia and Turkey) word for "the day after tomorrow." *(A) This word should be used in English immediately and (B) Scientists always look towards the future, some more than others. They are always thinking about "The day after tomorrow." So I feel it's fitting to call him a zeg scientist, because he changed the day after tomorrow, for the better (though an environmentalist might have a different reception).*

The second popular type of phone to exist after Bell's version was the candlestick phone. This style died out in the 1930s when manufacturers started combining the mouth piece. Soon the rotary phone rose up the ranks. According to the article "How We Stopped Communicating Like Animals," by Ben Zigterman, "The rotary phone became popular. To dial, you would rotate the dial to the number you wanted, and then release" (1). Based on my limited interaction with rotary dial phones (again I'm in the emojiers group, not a baby boomer), this must have been incredibly tedious. As push-button phones gained popularity in the 1960s and '70s, the rotary dial phone thankfully began its slow death (Zigterman 1). Around 1963, the "push tone" entered the market. Produced by AT&T, this phone used a keypad to call people. Like the name, it works by "pushing" the keys, the keys then send the operator a "tone" that lets them know who you want to call (Zigterman 1). *(Heads up it's the dirty white colored phone, I mean my grandma STILL has this phone).* And then portable phones came along, according to Zigterman, "Portable, or cordless, phones were the remote equivalent of the TV remote. You were no longer physically attached to your phone's base station" (1). This phone was amazing because people no longer had to be right next to the charging station.

The next revolutionary phone on our list is what I call "the brick"—*or the Motorola DynaTAC 8000X, not that anyone would know that* (see Figure 2). This was the first mobile phone, available at a modest $3,995, weighing 1.75 pounds, and with an amazing 30 minute battery life (Zigterman 1). *(Like an iPhone with serious water damage . . . and no screen).* After they began to sort out kinks with the first phone *(I can't imagine why)* another popular phone hit the market. It was

the Nokia 5110. This candy-bar-style phone came with the ability to change its outer shell (Zigterman 1). And now, we take a trip to the first phone that had a camera, Sanyo SCP-5300: "Released in 2003, the Sanyo SCP–5300 was one of the first phones to include a camera. It was already clear that digital cameras would replace film cameras, but it wasn't clear that a camera could fit in a phone" (Zigterman 1).

Figure 2: The first modern cellphone
(aka "the Brick").

So as I was going thru all of these phones, and I was wondering how I was going to do my primary research. Primary research was a newer concept for me. As an eighth grader, I had never done primary research. MORE PHONES!!! *(Warning by-product of capitalism, buying a bunch of stuff that basically all do the same thing.)* By this time, OK, finally a phone I recognize, the BlackBerry! "BlackBerry, was by far the leading smartphone manufacturer in the 2000s. With their advanced e-mail capabilities, BlackBerry Messenger, and physical keyboards, BlackBerry smartphones were the ultimate business phone" (Zigterman 1). *(I know this phone because when I was little my dad used it a lot . . . until the iPhone came along.)* And last, but by far not the least, iPhones and Androids. According to Zigterman, "When the iPhone was introduced in 2007, Apple brought the smartphone to the masses. With its intuitive touch screen, intelligent sensors, and sleek design, the iPhone has been an incredible success" (Zigterman 1). I guess I should also add that telephones are still very much used today, and, for now anyway, some of these older phones are still out there.

OK, more research . . . texting isn't nearly as old as the first two inventions (The Emojiers Era). As of December 3, 2012, texting (SMS) enjoyed its twentieth anniversary according to a news article "Text messaging turns 20" by Tracy McVeigh. According to McVeigh, "Neil Papworth, a software

programmer from Reading, sent an early festive greeting to a mate.... he had sent the world's first text message, Merry Christmas" (1). You can see a picture of this in Figure 3. Now texting didn't explode overnight; it took time for the world to get used to texting. I don't mean a few months, either. According to McVeigh, "It took seven years from Papworth's festive greeting for texting to take off, let alone spawn that whole new style of linguistics from LOL to L8R… UK mobile phone companies believed people wouldn't want to type in a message when they could simply speak" (1). So, texting slowly grew on the world. Skip a few and we jump to the present. (Well, closer to the present since the news article was written in 2012). According to a survey by Acision, "[Texting] is still the most popular way to message despite competition from e-mail and social networking messaging services with 92 percent of smartphone users still preferring to text" (McVeigh 1). *(So to the 8 percent of you who don't prefer texting that's OK, you can send a telegram).*

Figure 3: The first ever text message read "Merry Christmas."

OK, everybody is so far on their primary research, but I still can't decide what to do. Alright, what do I know I'd like to have? I want to stray from what everybody else is doing, and I want to be slightly different, so I should stay away from surveys. I want somebody else's opinions though, hmmm, what to do, what to do. Well, I suppose I could do an interview, but who to interview? Light bulb!!! I could interview Mrs. Kieffer. She's smart, and knows what she is talking about. Brain, why couldn't you have thought of this a week ago!!!

So I had a few ideas on how all three genres were connected. I figured that they were all sub-connected, through conventions and history. I just didn't have a word for it. So I just called them "sister genres" at first. Then I began to think more in-depth about the genres' relationship. They all share similar roots, but there was still some differences (maybe cousins?). Mrs. Kieffer said they were called "genre sets" *(probably named by historians)* and "genre families."

Now, families are always supposed to be this big loving happy symbol, in the traditional way you look at families. But siblings fight and clash with each other, usually the oldest wins, at least when you are kids. And the siblings can

be as different as night and day. I think these genres probably behave more like siblings. They clash, and on the outside they are as different as night and day, *especially the telephone*, which doesn't have much writing in it. So I asked Mrs. Kieffer these questions. I really wanted to do a face-to-face interview, but since we were going to ISU for the Spreading Roots Colloquium, I had to take a science test I would be missing. So, instead, Mrs. Kieffer had to type her answers on a Google document. Mrs. Kieffer did this on the bus ride to ISU, which means that one of the questions is answered in two parts.

Evans: How do you feel about telegrams being related to texting?

Kieffer: I'm not sure that I would call them sister and/or brother genres, although I must say that I really like these terms and the idea that genres are related. I think that this is a better way to characterize them than genre sets. (Also, I really like the comments that you include that provide some insight into your thinking—something to definitely do in your journal article). Back to your theorizing, I think brother and sister genres represent how genres move historically and including brother, sister (and even cousin genres) represents a horizontal movement that seems more accurate than just including genres as a set (that implies relationship in a much more general way). So, back to your original question. I think they are close enough to be related, but I wonder if they would actually be parent genres? I think of this genre as more of a vertical relationship, that texting evolved from telegrams, rather than a sibling relationship that would seem to imply a more side-by-side movement. Now, I also agree that they could be time-traveling-ish cousins, evolving from another genre, which is most certainly a possibility. As you said, it's complicated, and that's a really important concept when you are trying to understand, genres. They are complicated and figuring out their relationships is also very complicated. There are plenty of things to figure out, not only how they are related to other genres, but how people use them. We use genres to communicate, and that use determines, in part, how genres are shaped, so we need to consider not only who creates the genres, but also the intended audience that they are created for. (And you know that those pesky unintended audiences also have an impact, depending on plenty of other factors—this is where trajectory begins to play a role). If you start thinking about CHAT, you can see how the complications expand (with seemingly exponential expansion of complications, right?). I won't do a detailed activity system analysis here, but just think about the impact that tools have on our ability to use genres. Texting wasn't possible before certain technologies were available, and neither was the telegram—think about how genres had to travel before the telegraph was invented.

Evans: Do you think they are related enough, through history and their evolution, to be almost sister (or brother) genres? (Is this a thing?). Looking back they could be time traveling-ish cousins I suppose, it's complicated!

They evolved from each other, but they both still exist. OK, I found out they are called genre sets and then genre families, but genre sisters (or brothers, *it's kinda like motherland, fatherland scenario*) sound way: (a) way simpler and easy to understand, (b) way cooler, and (c) the name genre families sounds like historians named it. (I mean families fight but are all lovey-dovey. While sisters and brothers fight constantly or are best friends, they always contradict each other, too. Food for thought).

Kieffer: So, I think the idea of brother/sister/cousin relationships are certainly possible, because of some of the reasons that you mention. And, I think Snapchat is probably a cousin of texting, similar, related to be sure, but not necessarily a sister/brother. I'm really liking this idea, so I'm kinda fighting to think of reasons that it won't work or wouldn't be a possibility. I probably need to think a little more before I can find evidence that it wouldn't be a logical option.

Evans: Do you think this might work for other genres? Why or why not?

Kieffer: I might be having a reception issue here, so I'm going to ask a question and then answer based on my reception since you are sitting close to the front of the bus. And this isn't the ideal place for a conversation (again, problems with reception, just different ones, like shouting, which I don't like to do, and being able to hear you on a noisy bus . . .). I think the genre of the telegram and text messaging are similar, and, in fact, I think they are related. How, let's see. I think it might depend on where we begin historically. If we begin with the telegram, that's a kinda artificial starting place. Certainly there are antecedents for this genre, and it's important to take that into consideration. If you are only tracing these two genres, I think you still need to acknowledge that you're looking at something that could be expanded. (In other words this is a large family tree.) I'm thinking it's more of a parental relationship. Now, there are plenty of other people who think about these things, too. (If I have time today, I'll ask Dr. Walker what she thinks.) I think you'll find that most people who work with genre theories would say that these genres are related. The language that you use for this relationship becomes more contested, depending on the terms you use. We're getting close to ISU, so I'm stopping for now, but I'll continue to think about this, and I'll answer the rest of your questions later.

Kieffer: (Finishing up question 3) I think the genres are similar. If you think about the conventions of both, and do a little genre analysis, you will be able to see those similarities. Both were (originally) short due to the cost of producing the message—people used to pay per text, and I think telegrams were charged by the word. Both were (are) used to send messages quickly. In the case of telegrams, arriving faster than letters. They also used abbreviations in telegrams

to make the message shorter. (You can probably find some examples of these abbreviations if you look at the historical information, and maybe you already have found this. It's been a little while since I've read your secondary research.)

Evans: Do these genres sound like they could be siblings? Explain.

Kieffer: I would call the telegram a parent of the text. I think the family relationship works here, but I wouldn't call it a sibling genre. I think the time-traveling cousin could work, (and it makes me smile), but I think the parent relationship makes more sense to me here. Now, I have to acknowledge that other people who use genre theory may disagree with me. I did have a conversation with Mr. Hummels, who also uses genre theory in his work, and he also thought that a telegram would be a parent genre. Again, this just takes into consideration that we are beginning with the telegram, and that genre has antecedents, as well—you know more members of the family tree.

Thanks for interviewing me. I really enjoy thinking about these relationships, and I'm super excited that you are considering them, as well. Again, I like your theorizing about the sibling relationships of genres, and I will be mentioning it to the other folks that I know who work with genre theory, and I'll let you know what kind of feedback I receive. If you have any other questions for me, I'm happy to answer them. Just let me know.


The second thing I did after reading Mrs. Kieffer's awesome responses, (the first being to get out a dictionary), was to reread the responses because I'm never surprised by what I missed the first time. *(I thought* The Outsiders *took place in New York until classmates started to give their presentations. Oops . . .)* I loved Mrs. Kieffer's responses, and they taught me a thing or two about my research and genre relationships. I read her responses and found myself agreeing with her on just about everything. I'll admit there were some things I was most definitely wrong on, but that's OK. It's now part of my genre knowledge, and I'm sure I will use it in the future *(I did while we were writing this article—I compared the abstract to the summaries on the backs of books, probably parents because I'm fairly sure books came before college articles).*

Thinking deeper into the way things are connected can often lead somewhere you never thought of. Then following human nature and curiosity, you discover more about the world. *(I mean, I always say how much I dislike Shakespeare and his use of "The Queen's English" [That goofy talking style about thee, and thy], but that phrase in itself was actually his quote. He coined the phrase.)* This creates a new understanding of the world, and a reason to dig a little deeper. Looking at these genres as they evolve and change can often lead to new ideas and theories *(and considering that in four to five billion years the sun will explode, we*

better start thinking of a way not to die, if humans are still around). So maybe focusing a lens to the world will help us understand its chaos. And writing can often help us get there. To quote Wayne Dyer, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

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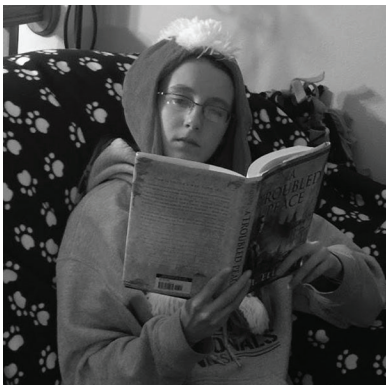
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