

Reading as a Writer of Genres

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This article approaches reading from a more active perspective. Jordana argues that reading is a two-part structure that readers often take for granted. It consists of an automatic process of looking and analyzing, *seeing and understanding*. As readers, people recognize generic frameworks based on formal, visual elements that facilitate this automatic process and tell us *how* to read. Jordana takes two generic examples, one short and one long, and describes an active reading process. She suggests that active reading, or identifying generic features and frameworks as strategies for writing, provides a model for how readers might learn to write more effectively in a situation.

When Amy Devit, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff study genre, they explain that our knowledge of genre provides a “mental framework for how to read [that genre]” (48). But reading is a two-part structure that we often take for granted. It consists of both looking and analyzing, *seeing and understanding*. The generic framework that we recognize is based on formal, visual elements that tell us how to read.

Let’s try breaking down the framework, or *structure*, of a familiar genre to see how it impacts our reading of it. Take this flyer that advertises Coffee Klatches for the Writing Program at ISU for example, and as we proceed, try to keep one thing in mind: the generic/social context of fliers, how people expect to read them or expect them to “work,” is as a quick and easy read.

You can also think of this as the visual format or layout of a genre.

Grand Opening



**The Good Day Archive
And Coffee Klatches**

**Beginning Wednesday, October 13th in the Writing
Program Space @ Stevenson 133**

10:00-11:00 AM: Join the Writing Program for its first Coffee Klatch! Drink coffee, eat pastries, and share your ideas. What's not to like? These weekly events (alternating Wed. & Thursdays during the semester) will be moderated by instructors interested in sharing information on particular topics.

Our First Klatch (Wednesday, Oct. 13) will be moderated by Susanna Rodriguez, and the topic will be **student agency in the classroom**. Instructors seeking assistance, seeking to share knowledge, or just seeking a good conversation, all are welcome. Coffee, Tea, and pastries provided. Bring your own intelligent ideas.

12:00-4:00 PM: **The Grand Opening of the Writing Program Good Day Archive.** We've designed this digital archive as a location where instructors can share their excitement about days when everything seems to go right in the classroom. We're focusing specifically on efforts to teach writing skills and concepts, but we think that topics such as leading a good class discussion or helping students to take charge of their learning can transcend the boundaries between writing-intensive courses and other courses. So please visit the Writing Program (133 Stevenson) to learn more about how to contribute to the Good Day Archive. 15 minutes is all you'll need to spend!

- Enhance your professional development
- Share your teaching knowledge with other instructors
- Snacks and coffee will be provided!

For more information: isu.professional.development@gmail.com

Right away, I can tell a couple of things just by *looking* at this flyer. First, it's meant to be informative because it's mainly made up of words. The only picture is a small clip art picture of a steaming cup. Since it is the only visual on the page though, my eye is immediately drawn to it. It's probably for this reason that it is placed in such close proximity to what acts as a heading or title for the document. It gives the graphic context so we assume it's coffee in the cup at the same time as it draws our eye to the main point of the text.

Proximity acts as a visual cue for readers. We know how to read the picture in context with whatever it appears next to. Just as we know this comment should be read when the line that links it to the text appears and in context with the word or phrase it highlights.

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So when we see a text, whatever draws our immediate attention acts as the introduction or the beginning.

We can assume these lines are the most important since they are the largest and draw the eye's immediate attention. You might also note that there is a hierarchy of importance. The first two centered lines are slightly bigger than the second pair. This is a visual cue to let us know which is slightly more important while balancing out the aesthetic aspects of the text. All the text in the same font at the same size would be too congested, take too long to read. We might just choose not to look at it at all. The contrast in size and shape of the text makes it more appealing. So instead, we stop and take a look. It functions in two ways, then: 1) a visual cue telling us how to read the text, and 2) a design technique to make us want to look more closely by offering visual contrast.

Basically, the font says "Hey, Look at me!"

We need contrast or the eye starts to read everything in exactly the same way, maybe even skipping things the author/designer really wanted us to know were important.

The design of this flyer places the What, When, and Where in the most visible place. So the main topic, or purpose, for the flyer is immediately obvious. I might not see another line, but I would still know everything

necessary to accomplish the designer’s purpose: meeting for a good day archive and coffee klatch at a specified time and location. There, we have a text that uses visual format to guide the eye for a quick and easy read. Aha! This flyer adheres to the main category of fliers as a quick and easy read. Way to go flyer-designer... Success!

So first I observed all of the elements. Then I broke it down in order to read it. We all know that a flyer with information about what, when, and where something takes place is put out to try to get us to come to that place and event, but analyzing the emphasis placed upon those parts of a flyer as a visual introduction helps us read that purpose more clearly and more immediately. The visual format or framework told us *how* to read it.

There’s more to our flyer than just the visual introduction though. This is followed with a larger block of text that gives us more details about the first coffee klatch and what the good day archive is, a sort of body for our “text.” Again, certain parts are bolded to give emphasis, so I know that I should read those parts closely. But I understand as a reader of fliers that it is only necessary to read this section of the flyer if I am interested in learning more about what was introduced earlier.

If I am interested though, there are other visual cues that tell me how to read the remaining parts of the flyer as well. The bulleted points, for instance. I know when I see those bullets that something is about to be listed. It’s another visual cue that tells me *how* to read what follows. Something that we see in other genres as well.

And the flyer concludes with a note. “For more information.” This is a textual cue of sorts. I know when I see this that I will typically see an email address or a phone number. I also know that this contact will be able to tell me about what is in the flyer. This is a common closing device in flyers since they function as those quick and easy sources of information. The contact is there for anything more the reader may need to know, like can I bring kids with me? For that sort of comprehensive information about the event, we’ll have to look outside of the text. So we should really consider the note and contact info as the conclusion of the flyer. There won’t be any more parts to look at; no other pages floating around that have been misplaced since multiple page flyers aren’t *quick* or *easy* for anybody!

What this final cue tells us more generally as readers though, is that cues for how to read something may be textual as often as visual elements of design. Sometimes it may be both. Novels or even textbooks are a good example of this. The positioning or placement of the words on the page let you know exactly what you are reading and how you should approach the

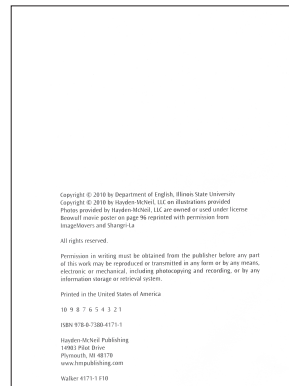
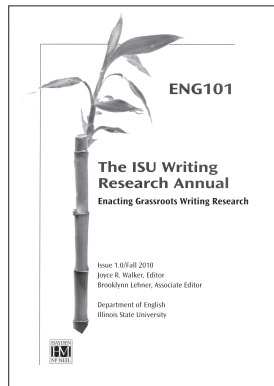
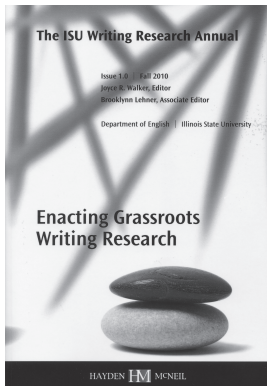
It’s helpful to think of this as simply the middle of the text. The part that the eye cannot take in at a glance, and that precedes the end of the conclusion.

Just think of this as the very last thing we see. For informative flyers it will often be contact information for event organizers

As in the case of our Big, Bolded Title since the font acts as a type of artistic design as well.

reading process. So we can use the same reading strategies to our advantage when reading books, and this gives you a more authorly or writerly perspective on what goes into the construction of a book.

Let's take the *Illinois State University (ISU) Writing Research Annual* as an example. Below are the first three pages of the Annual.



It's important when learning about genres to familiarize ourselves with the terminology specific to those genres so we can think and talk about them in smart and effective ways.

Typically when we read books, we read the cover and perhaps the back cover for structural reasons, meaning we know when we look in those two places we find what the book is about. The cover will have the title, and the back cover will have either a short summary of the book, or *blurb*, or quotes from critics praising the book for some specific reason that tells us a little about the book as well. The design of the cover gives us important information about what's inside the book, then.

For example, two main titles appear on the *ISU Annual* as we can see by the size and boldness of the fonts. The first title is “The ISU Writing Research Annual” at the top of the cover. Already we know this book is about writing, research, and that it is published yearly since it is an *Annual*. But this title is slightly smaller than the next main title “Enacting Grassroots Writing Research,” which is almost twice the size of the other *and* centered. This suggests that the content within is focused more on this aspect. If we weren't sure about that, we only have to look at the picture on the cover to reinforce this assessment. At first glance, we recognize two rocks stacked on top of each other. These are very clear, but there is another picture that is out of focus in the background, large green sprigs of some kind? This is confusing if we don't have the rocks and the title (Enacting Grassroots) to help us recognize what the out-of-focus picture actually is—grass. Get it, *GRASS*roots. Well that's clever. Just like the picture from the coffee klatch flier provides context for the text, the text provides context for the picture on the cover of the *ISU Annual*. So the cover uses compositional design techniques, a blend of text and visual image in a very conscious, writerly manner.

So someone designed the *Annual*. We can sometimes forget this in our hurry to get at what is inside a book. We often think of books as having only authors, for example, those enlightened geniuses that naturally write and create to teach and/or entertain us. But books are usually put together and published by people other than the authors that write them. Carefully observing the structure or format of a book reminds us of this so we can think of the process that goes into actually producing a book. The cover of the *Annual* credits Joyce Walker (editor) and Brooklynn Lehner (associate editor) for designing the *Annual*. The authors that appear in the *Annual* only make up one small part in the process of writing that book. And Joyce Walker and Brooklynn Lehner are only one more step in that overall process as we see by looking at the front matter.

After the title page above, you see the copyright page. How often do you, as a reader of books, look at the copyright page? Probably not often, which is why the text is *visually* unappealing. It's small and close together, hard to read. The information is purely technical in nature, but as a writer and researcher the copyright page includes important information. For example, academic citation of a book in the works cited section of a research paper requires a date of publication. You find this on the copyright page. Also, if the title page doesn't have the necessary publication information required for academic citation, then you will be able to find it on the copyright page.

Publishers are the last step in the process of writing a book since they arrange for advertising and marketing aspects of the book as well as its physical production. If you want to write a book, knowing where to find the publication information of a book also becomes important. Reading the types of books a publishing company puts out can give you an idea, as an author, where to send your work. Not to mention the copyright page gives the physical mailing address and often the website of the publishing company as well. Authors may read the front matter of a book far more closely than other parts of a book because they need to do so in order to get their own work published. And recognizing the structural aspects of the book genre, having a mental framework for how books work, allows them to do so.

So readers have an innate understanding of what and how they are supposed to read a genre based on their purpose. Are you reading as a reader or writer of genres, for example. As writers of genres, we can either use this innate understanding or we can undermine it to make a point. More importantly, understanding the *automatic responses* of people to genres as *mental frameworks* can help us choose the most effective genre to write in for each individual writing situation. Genre gives us a whole new way to look at audience and purpose based not only on what people read *but how!*

This is essentially what editors do.

The front matter of a book can be any number of pages but includes everything right up until the first chapter of a book. The title and copyright pages, tables of contents, prologues, and forwards all make up the front matter of books.

Another structural or formatting element of the genre of books!

The place of publication and the publisher's name can usually be found on the title page, but not always.

We do it all the time with textbooks when we use things like glossaries, indexes, and tables of contents to flip to the place in the book we want to read.

Works Cited

Bawarshi, Anis, Amy Devitt, and Mary Jo Reiff. *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*. New York: Pearson & Longman, 2004. Print.



Jordana Hall completed an M.A. with a focus in children's literature in 2009 from Texas A&M University Commerce. She is currently pursuing publication as the illustrator of a mixed medium poetry/prose adolescent novel co-authored by Dr. Susan Stewart and Dr. Kathryn Jacobs of Texas A&M University Commerce.

