

If Wallets Could Talk: Investigating the Genre of Receipts

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In this article, Grayson attempts to break down and categorize one of the most popular, yet rarely regarded, literary genres of our culture—the receipt. While receipts may appear to be simple documents recounting basic information, they in fact contain a wealth of data that is revealing of both the issuer's business practices and the recipient's personality and character.

Reach into your pockets and pull out any receipts you may have stuffed in them. Dig through your wallet, your purse, your winter jacket, your beach shorts, your recycle bin, your sofa cushions, your desk drawers, and kitchen table. Collect your concert tickets, movie stubs, and gas pump printouts. Collect them all and splay them out in front of you. Be sure to give yourself plenty of room. Once you have rested that last piece of paper down, you have made art. What you have just created is a mosaic, a self-portrait for our modern age. Each document reveals some detail about its owner, sometimes revealing too much. And if you gather enough of these little and seemingly innocuous slips, a story, a picture, a biography is formed.

We All Know What a Receipt Is, Right? Maybe Not

There are various types of receipts. There are the obvious sorts, like an ATM or credit card receipt, or the long slip the clerk gives you at a grocery store. Then there are more specialized kinds, like opera tickets and confirmation emails. Traditionally, receipts are given to the patron

<i>The Dascha</i>	
◇ fine Russian cuisine ◇	
Transaction #70819 1/16/2012 8:10PM	
Your server - Elena	
2 Borsch - small	\$8.40
1 Salad	\$2.75
1 Shashlyk - Beef	\$13.80
1 Pelmeni	\$9.60
2 Kvas	\$4.50
2 Tort - chocolate	\$7.00
Subtotal	\$46.05
Tax	\$3.68
Total	\$49.73
Tip	-----
Total	-----
"Bolshoi spasibo!"	
Customer Copy	

Figure 1: Sample Restaurant Receipt

after they have received a service or product. These are to be used as proof of an exchange. There are also more specific types of receipts that are given out before a service is rendered, like those of concert or movie tickets. What I find interesting about receipts, which is why I am writing this article, is that they can serve a variety of functions and purposes for both the author and the recipient. Every receipt ever written was shaped to convey very specific information and goals. They must be concise, as most are limited in space. Let's take the receipt shown in Figure 1. On this little form, we have the name of the establishment, the number of the transaction, the date, an itemized list of the items purchased, the subtotal, amount charged in tax, the conveniently-added-for-you total, and the final personal touch of gratitude. Let's break down these elements to discover the wealth of information hidden in this small, concise text. What follows is a discussion of the generic features of receipts that I have found through a little investigating.

The Name of the Business

The name of the business is almost always printed on a receipt. This simple inclusion helps the customer remember or prove that they patronized that establishment. Proof of purchase may be necessary for returns or complaints. The name appearing on the receipt is also like a small billboard for the business. When you look at the receipt, their name appears. In my wallet, I have advertisements for US Bank, Chipotle, Noodles and Company, and Holiday Theaters. I see their names and I either think about going back or never going back. The receipt can also advertise to others. As many people litter their receipts or leave them lying about, other people can gaze upon them and mentally revisit their association with that company. Someone could find the ticket stub shown above and think, "Oh, the Holiday 8 is showing Batman. I want to go there and see that." This link between the business name and its product leads us to the next point.

The Item

Printing the item on the receipt is practical because it registers exactly what product or service was rendered. This information is essential because both the customer and the business can prove that the item was charged. Try taking a shirt back to Express with a receipt that does not list that a

particular shirt was purchased. They might refuse the return, or—even worse—think it was stolen! The receipt is your proof. And don't forget, naming the item advertises the product they are selling. Let's remember the person who randomly comes upon the ticket stub. "Oh," he says to himself, "They're showing Dark Knight."



Figure 2: Sample Movie Ticket

The Transaction Number

Do you ever wonder what those strange numbers on your receipts mean? I know that I've asked myself: Why are they there? What do they do? I never learned until I became a manager at a movie theater in my early twenties. Transaction numbers are printed on the receipt for the business to be able to track down the exact purchase in their records. Shorter numbers usually refer to batch processing, which means that the company clears and organizes their transactions in groups. Most companies limit their transaction pool to daily. Some receipts do not get processed at the end of the day, and that can lead to some pretty giant numbers.

The Date

This convention is rather straightforward. You were at that business at that exact time. Knowing the time the transaction took place can be helpful for a number of reasons. The date can work like the transaction number, as the business can bring up the transaction in their records by the date. In my personal experience as a theater manager, I would use the time stamp to find the customer on the surveillance footage. If there was a complaint about an employee, I could see on the footage who the employee was and find out exactly what happened. The date also serves as proof of purchase in case some stores limit returns to a certain number of days, like 60 or 90 days from the date of purchase. Finally, the date can be used to establish a time frame. If I get audited from the Internal Revenue Service, I could prove that certain purchases were made in that given year. The time stamp could also be helpful if you need an alibi!

The Prices

Have you ever been overcharged for something? Did the box office attendant charge you for an adult ticket when you explicitly said you were a student? Were you charged an evening rate for a matinee? It happens. Or, have you ever been flabbergasted when you get your receipt and the total is way bigger than you thought it would be? That situation happens to me almost every time I go to Schnucks. I scrutinize the prices, do the math quickly in my head, and then realize that yes, I do owe them that enormous amount

of money. The price is printed on the receipt to resolve many such situations. Plus, it tells the retailer how much money to refund you if you make a return. How convenient!

“That Personal Touch”

Businesses are streamlining their practices to reduce the amount of time it takes to complete an order. The thermal paper printout is an example of this reformation practice. Before thermal paper became an industry standard, receipts had to be printed line-by-line, sometimes on carbon copy sheets. Carbon copying is a time consuming task that requires the clerk to detach the receipt from its roll of paper, remove the perforated tabs that were used to feed the sheets through the printer, and separate the business’s copy from that of the customer. Businesses have found a clever way to use receipts to streamline efforts and boost the breadth of their advertising network. They have managed to effectively negotiate these goals through the appearance of quality customer service. Customer service is a tool that businesses employ to further increase their sales, whether it is upselling (“Would you like fries with that?”), negotiating (“While the car is valued at \$16,000, let me talk to my manager to see if I can get that number lowered for you.”), or alleviating any doubts a customer may have about buying a product (“That color goes great with your skin tone.”). Good customer service also includes recommendations of services and products, and an expression of gratitude to the customer for their patronage. Well, now that information can be printed on the receipt and make the transaction time shorter.

While some companies give the same recommendation on every receipt, other businesses have taken advantage of receipts for direct marketing. Using computerized systems, businesses can make recommendations based on the nature of the item(s) purchased. For instance, my Noodles & Company receipt recommends for me to “Try one of our 5 new sandwiches.” How did they know that I didn’t know they made sandwiches? What if I had ordered one? That would have been both poor service and awkward. But their software may have known that I did not order a sandwich, so the recommendation for their new product gets imprinted on my receipt. This process can be very effective. Just writing this article, I am reminded that I would like to try a California Melt at Wendy’s. Hey, Burger King, I’ll be back for that BBQ chicken sandwich. Keep it warm for me. Thank you too, US Bank. I will go mobile with you.

Of Course it’s Not a Perfect Genre

As straightforward as these conventions seem, receipts still fail. While I was working at the movie theater, I would routinely get asked by customers what auditorium they are supposed to go into. I’d ask for their ticket and

get annoyed because the usher had accidentally torn off that part of the ticket when they were redeeming the pass. It wasn't really the usher's fault, after all, because the thick paper was thinly perforated, leaving rough tears, missing information, and confused movie patrons. And what about those times when you try to take something back and the clerk can't find the item information because the text is jumbled, confusing, or vague? Take a look at the Monica's Closet receipt. How would the clerk be able to discern if the "women's shirt" of the receipt refers to the same item their customer is trying to return? The clerk may not accept the return. Also, a lot of businesses have a policy to collect the customer's receipt during a return transaction. This policy can cause a problem for their customer, as the customer may want to return another item on the receipt and now they don't have one!

Monica's Closet		
Prairie Hills Mall, Prairie Hills, MI		
(555) 529-9479		
Or find us on the web!		
www.monicasclosetprahills.com		
<hr/>		
12/1/11	2:23pm	Ashley G.
Women's Shirt		\$12
Moni Shoes		\$29
	Tax	\$3.28
	Total	\$44.28
<hr/>		
<i>Bring back this receipt and get a \$5 discount on your next purchase!</i>		

Figure 3: Sample Retail Receipt

Receipts Have Other Purposes Too

Sometimes there might be more text on the receipt than was originally printed on it. Receipts can be a way to interact with the business or customer in a way that is not defined by the printed text. Often a clerk or a waitress or a Girl Scout will add little notes to the slip they hand you. They'll write, "Thanks for coming," "Pick up Monday," or "Cute dress!" For many restaurant credit card receipts, you are prompted to write in the tip and total. Occasionally, there will be a comment section, an area where you are free to write anything about your experience. Your only limit is the small amount of space provided. Sometimes someone will write a note for the waitress even if there isn't a designated space.

In the fall of 2011, Seattle bartender Victoria Liss received a different kind of tip from one of her customers. Instead of money, he left her a note on his receipt that said, "P.S. You could stand to loose [sic] a few pounds." Not only was his crude suggestion on the receipt, but as it was a credit card receipt, it also had his name printed on it. Outraged and hurt, Liss looked the man's name up on Facebook and found the profile of a man with his name and a picture that resembled her customer. She also uploaded a photo of the receipt onto her profile for all of her friends to see, comment on, and share with others. The news of this "tip" spread, and was even featured on ABC News.¹ Liss did not stop there. Photocopies of "Andrew Meyer's" profile picture were printed and taped on the windows of several Seattle area

restaurants and bars. A manhunt was underway. Unfortunately, the Andrew Meyer in her photo was not the same man as her customer, but someone who simply shares the name. Receipts can have power. They can help or hurt people. Because the receipt's text included this man's name, another man was affected and unfairly ridiculed. The original Meyer could not have known the trajectory of his text when it was written, nor could Liss have known that he would say something so cruel when she handed him the paper.²

Perhaps Even Better than a Photo Album

Take another look at that collage you made earlier. How many of these documents hold a memory for you? Do you remember receiving these papers? Do you remember where you were and what you were doing? If you remember, then the receipt has an agency, a power you can access by merely looking at it. You were somewhere, you did something, you connected with someone, and now you have proof. Now you can remember. Receipts have a value that supersedes their intention as mere bills of sale. Some people collect ticket stubs, concert tickets, or let their wallets puff with wads of thermal paper. Philately, otherwise known as stamp collecting, is a passionate hobby of many people. ISU PhD student Ryan Edel offered a comment on receipts when he observed, "Usually, they mean more to me than the exchange of cash. For me, they're more like markers of memory. I use them to remember where I've been, who I went there with, and essentially who I was at the time." Receipts are mementos. Why buy a key chain of a palm tree when your plane ticket says it all? As the associations we keep are personal, perhaps we buy those key chains not so we can remember, but so we can show others we have been somewhere exotic.

This distinction marks a division between the types of mementos we show others and those we keep for ourselves. We keep receipts on our body, in our pockets, in our wallets next to pictures of our loved ones. They crowd our night stand, fill in our scrapbooks. But of course not all receipts are worth keeping, and we may just be too lazy to throw those away. Despite these reasons, these small documents can still strike a stirring memory. A receipt is more than just a piece of paper, and whatever is written on the receipts has a degree of power.

I would like to finish this article by discussing the present state of these little wonders. Receipts are disappearing. As technology has progressed, physical receipts have become almost obsolete. Retailers have a financial incentive to implement software that allows the customer to choose whether or not they would like a printed receipt. As we are becoming more sensitive

to our environment, meaning we want to cut down fewer trees and fill in fewer landfills, many of us are starting to decline the printout offer on routine purchases. Technology is making transactions easier and less expensive for both the vendor and the consumer. Internet purchases have become incredibly popular. I buy most of my non-grocery items from Amazon.com. They don't charge tax, and with my student status, I get free two-day shipping on everything I buy through them. What does this internet explosion mean for our little friends, receipts? Internet vendors send digital receipts to the e-mail accounts of their customers. Since these receipts are not limited to the size of a small piece of paper, they can include a lot more information such as estimated shipping times, return policies, vendor information, and recommended products based on your purchase. Technology has become so advanced that advertising can become more and more specific to a customer's taste, especially with many purchases. As the recommendations become better tuned to the customer's tastes, the customer will be more likely to continue purchasing from that website. This cycle leads to less in-store purchasing and fewer receipts to fill your wallet.

While the digitization of receipts is certainly better for the environment, I still plan on requesting a receipt if I want to remember that moment later. And I'm glad that I do, because every time I open my wallet, I have a positive thought. That bank slip reminds me of the time a group of my friends and I swung by US Bank on the way to The Castle to see a Talking Heads tribute concert. I hold this slip and I instantly remember what songs I liked, how we danced, that weird tattoo that one guy had on his hip of David Byrne, and how my roommate showed up and owned the dance floor. I remember even much more than that, but I'll leave those memories for me and the next time I open my wallet.

Endnotes

1. Kindelan, Katie. "Seattle Waitress Exposes Rude Tipper Online, Nabs Wrong Guy." ABC News. 13 Oct. 2011. <<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2011/10/seattle-waitress-exposes-rude-tipper-online-nabs-wrong-guy/>>.
2. Several employees across the United States have banded together to participate in <http://15percent.tumblr.com/>. Stilted employees can post photos of receipts to show how their customers have gyped them.



Dustin Grayson is a Creative Writing Master's student who is obsessed with pop culture, food, and nearly all forms of art. And the genre: bildungsroman. When he is not hanging around the English Department, or watching or talking about movies, he is busy whispering into his wallet, wishing his receipts would finally talk back.