

The Genre of Grandma's Letters

Oriana Gilson

Oriana Gilson uses texts she loves—letters from her grandmother—to explore the lessons we can take away from an analysis of everyday writing. Incorporating textual analysis, interviews, and secondary research, Gilson examines the antecedent genres that helped shape her grandmother's writing style and the ways in which her grandmother transferred her understandings of writing from one composing experience to another. Using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Gilson invites us to consider how the activities surrounding the production and reception of a text can provide insight into our own writing selves.

"A history of letters, in other words, must also include a history of letter writing as a social and cultural practice."

—Rebecca Earle, *Epistolary Selves*

My sister, cousin, and I frequently find ourselves in the middle of a gathering, huddled together, recounting a recent letter we received from our grandmother. Sometimes our focus is on the actual sharing of information—Giovanna graduated from college, Carlo is getting married, or Kelsey has started a new job—but most often, we are talking about the letters themselves. There is something in these letters that makes them so uniquely Grandma. She writes about everything from the chores she hopes to accomplish that day to her feelings about the importance of embracing cultures different from our own. Yet regardless of the topic, the style is unmistakable: she talks about the day-to-day happenings in her life and the lives of her family members, her words flow in a way that reveals a stream of consciousness, and her language is free from pretense or formality. Her letters tell stories, offer advice, recall histories, and remind the reader of his or her place within the community of our family. Most compelling is that whether she is describing how she

chopped the zucchini for lunch or is comforting you on the loss of a loved one, Grandma's style of composing always makes you feel like she is right there and that the two of you are engaged in a personal conversation (Figure 1).

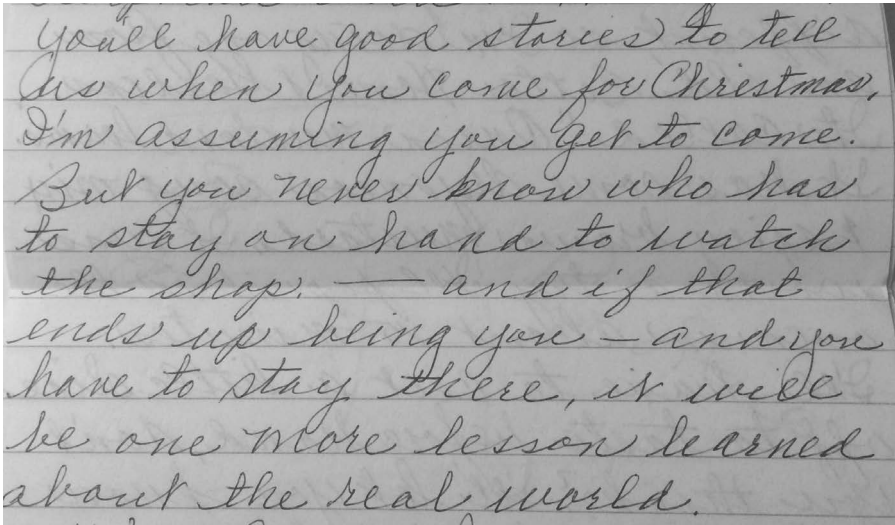


Figure 1: A snapshot of a handwritten letter sent to my cousin from my grandmother.

It is not only the letters, but also the woman behind the letters, that fascinates me. My grandmother defies so many of our contemporary (and academic) stereotypes of what it means to be a “writer.” She never attended college, and although she was an integral part of the family businesses, she never “worked outside the home.” Yet she is one of the most prolific writers I know. She has written an autobiography of her life focusing on her maternal family and is currently writing the autobiography/biography that she and my grandfather discussed but that he was unable to finish. She composes songs, holiday cards, lists, prayers, and recipes. Just a peek at her kitchen table reveals various piles of annotated documents: church bulletins, newspapers, cookbooks, comics, and notes. While she might not fit into our traditional conceptions of a writer (the academic with impeccable grammar and punctuation, poring over drafts of scholarly prose), she is most certainly a writer in every sense of the word.

It is exactly this juxtaposition that has always fascinated me about my grandmother's writing and that made her composing process seem like a perfect fit for this journal. The journal is a haven for research into all genres of writing, but it is a particularly welcoming forum for exploring forms that are either underrepresented or underappreciated in mainstream academia: tattoos, graffiti, cereal boxes, and coupons have all graced the pages of the journal. As one who leans toward more traditional forms of research and

writing, working within the genre of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* provided me with a unique sense of freedom which I don't normally encounter when faced with academic research or writing. The genre of the journal invites a combination of the personal and academic, and in my case provided a scholarly impetus to engage with someone I consider infinitely interesting, but with whom I never have enough time.

Prior to this article, bringing personal experience to the forefront of academic research was something that I agreed with pedagogically (I encourage such writing in my students), but not something I had necessarily acted upon personally. So it was with more than a little trepidation that I set out to articulate the focus for this piece. As I began to write, I became increasingly aware of how difficult it can be to take something that is deeply personal—i.e. my grandmother's letters and emails—and view it through a lens that allows for dissemination to a wider audience (whoever might read this article). I had trouble focusing myself—the fact is, I found myself wanting to tell the entire story of my grandmother, our relationship, and our conversations. It was not until I started immersing myself in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) that the idea struck me to study the letters through a rhetorical and activity-system approach, as opposed to a purely historical lens. In a basic sense, CHAT is a theory that invites us to think about the complexity of texts through analysis of how, when, why, and for what purpose a text is created. Incorporating elements of CHAT pushed me to look at the “how/why/what” of my grandmother's letters (Walker 72). Rather than look at my grandmother's letters as stories about my family, I could read them as a model of one person's writing process, as parts of a much larger system, and as examples of how writing functions as a social practice. No longer was I focused solely on the content of each letter, but rather on the activity surrounding the letters and the writer. I became interested in answering the questions: How did she compose these letters? Why did she decide to compose? What can I learn from her letters and her process?

What We Don't See on Paper

“. . . nor should the letter be studied in isolation, separated from the context and purpose for which it was written.”

—*Rebecca Earle, Epistolary Selves*

Going back through my grandmother's letters and learning about her process was both more fulfilling and more enlightening than I could have imagined. As I approached our work together, I decided it made sense to

talk to Grandma about what informed her decisions as she sat down to write. Basically, I thought I would explore the *antecedent genres* and *transfer* that she recognized in her writing. In a very basic sense, an *antecedent genre* is a genre that one has worked in before and that might influence how a new genre is approached. For most American college freshmen who attended high school in the 21st century, the five-paragraph essay is an all-too-familiar antecedent genre. Regardless of individual feelings about the five-paragraph essay, knowledge of the structures required in that particular genre might encourage a student-writer to incorporate or reject certain conventions. *Transfer* is not quite as easy to pinpoint, as it occurs when an individual carries a skill(s) with her from one situation to another (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström; Bawarshi and Reiff). For instance, many college courses require that a student complete a prerequisite prior to enrollment. So, I can't enroll for a physics course unless I first complete certain math courses. The rationale is that having completed the required math courses, I will *transfer* the key concepts from math and apply them to my understanding of physics.

Because I believe you can learn so much fascinating information by applying CHAT principles to writing practices, I was excited to discuss what antecedent genres my grandmother identifies as informing her letter writing and the ways in which she transfers the skills used in one genre to another. Surprisingly, her initial response to inquiries regarding her letter-writing process was some form of "I couldn't say, I just do it." Yet this shouldn't have surprised me at all; the fact is that most of us don't consider how we write something, we just write it. In trying to get at my grandmother's process, I was asking her to recall antecedent genres for a style of writing she has practiced for more than seventy years.

As a way to bridge process (the mental and physical acts that factor into the way my grandmother writes) and product (the physical letters) and to rephrase my inquiry into the antecedent genres that influenced her letter writing, I started with the obvious: school. My grandmother is of The Greatest Generation, schooled in an era in which students were drilled in grammar and punctuation, taught specific forms of writing, and would never dream of starting an address to their teacher with "Yeah, so . . ." I admit that I had a picture in my mind of little Grandma sitting in her elementary school, being taught the do's and don'ts of letter writing. So, in our conversation surrounding how she learned to write, I inquired: "For instance, did they teach you about letter writing in school?" Her response surprised me.

She immediately said, "Oh, if they did, I did not have it." But then she thought for a moment and said, "Well, in English we learned salutations [Dear so-and-so] and all these parts." She continued to note other ways in which her schooling influenced her writing: she acknowledged that when she

would write a business letter (she and Grandpa owned a family business), she thinks she built on the structures she had learned in her English class. She remembered learning about salutations, writing your address and the date at the top, and signing at the bottom. But when recalling what she learned in school, it was purely structural. To get at how she learned to compose a letter in her own unique way, that style that my sister, cousin, and I know so well, our conversation moved outside of what she learned in school. It was not until she began recalling her interactions with family, correspondences back and forth with specific individuals, and the events and situations that prompted her to write in the first place that Grandma could really tap into those activities and experiences that helped her form her writing self.

Why Write: The Genres of Grandma's Letters

“[G]enres hold the power to create the illusion of recurrence despite subtle or even major differences between writing tasks.”
—Angela Rounsaville, “Selecting Genres for Transfer”

Grandma wrote because she had reason to write. When she was still in high school, forces beyond either her or her mother's control prompted her mother to move back to the South and my grandmother to remain in the Midwest. So they kept close by writing letters. When she wrote to her mother, she emulated her mother's style. While both mother and daughter would include general information about themselves, much of what was written in the letters was in response to what was going on in the other person's life. She explained that her mother would “take down the letter that you just wrote her . . . [and] she would respond ‘I'm glad you got to go [to wherever you wrote about going], and I'm glad you did this, and I'm glad you did that.’” The letters seem a perfect fit for a mother and daughter to write—they were all about the other person.

Then Grandma got ready to write for a new purpose—keeping in touch with my grandpa, who was training in the South as a fighter pilot for WWII—and she naturally transferred the conventions she had used in a previous genre (writing letters to her mother) to the new one (writing letters to her sweetheart). She explained that after all the time writing to her mother, celebrating every bit of information that was shared, it didn't occur to her to do anything different. So Grandpa would write to Grandma, telling her about what he had done that day in training and at the base; then she would write back, commenting on everything he had told her in his last letter. She would respond with letters that said things like “I'm glad that you had a good formation today” or “I'm glad” that he did anything else he had mentioned

in his previous letter. She was transferring the skills she had learned in school and from her mother to a new writing situation. But it wasn't long before Grandpa wrote back and suggested that her style didn't fit the genre: he told her that he didn't want to be reminded of what he was doing every day, he wanted to know what *she* was doing each day. And so her letters changed to meet the audience and the genre.

Not surprisingly, elements of each of these antecedent genres still appear in the letters Grandma now writes to her grandchildren, particularly the style she adopted when she started writing to Grandpa. From the first line of the letter, Grandma starts painting a picture for you. Frequently, she invokes the thought or action that prompted her to write, but at other times, she just starts talking.

- “I just put bread in the oven, and I truly do think of you every time I bake bread.”
- “Happy Birthday, lovely! I’m jotting a quick note on a Saturday evening.”
- “Yup, I just finished putting some clothes in the dryer and sacking up some things for the Goodwill.”
- “It is about 9:30 pm and I just got out of the shower and was drying my hair, when I thought about the fact that I had never written to say thank you for the hair dryer you gave me.”
- “Yep, I have 3 ‘fiddler’s on the garage roof’ and I only have two fiddles in the house, so one of them will just have to sing, I guess.”

Her letters continue in much the same fashion, but frequently move away from what she is doing to what is going on in the lives of family members. And while she makes note of important events such as jobs, travel, or sicknesses, her focus is on the everyday. In one letter, she details a night of passing out candy to trick-or-treaters:

We were all over at Aunt Mel’s house last night. The spooks started coming about 4:30 and thinned out about 9:15. Aunt Margaret, Aunt Sophia, Brian (Jackie and Kelly were off at a twirling competition), Jen, grandpa and I were all there. Mel had put a heater facing grandpa . . . Jackie had made a veggie pizza before she left, for Brian to bring. I made a big tub of caramel corn and we had hot tea and coffee, so we were all taken care of.

This passage includes no big events nor breaking news; it is simply a night of passing out candy. But for someone far from home at that time, passages like this made me feel connected. Little details like why Jackie and Kelly weren't there, the heater for Grandpa, and the food they ate makes it feel real.

Yet as I reread Grandma's letters, it was not this aspect of her writing that came as a surprise. I expected to encounter details of the everyday, as I consider this one of the defining features of her writing. What did surprise me were the stories, histories, and advice interwoven with the details; elements that elevate her letters from the purely expository to the poetic. One of my favorite letters centers on her decision to tear down an old home that she and my grandpa had purchased when they were first married. The house shared plumbing with an apartment building that grandpa built and so required a non-traditional demolition. As the wife of, and frequent assistant to, a man that built homes from the ground up, she expresses surprise at the number of specialized contractors required for the demolition. And while the history she includes in this letter is one I cherish, it is the language and lesson found in the final line of this excerpt that stays with me the most:

. . . [the demolition] entails having one man dig the trenches, another man to lay the plumbing lines, another man to take down the house, etc. Your grandfather did all of those things himself, in our day. But of course, the world keeps going around and times and modes of doing things change, so I must go with the flow or be washed away by the tide of new ideas.

It is as though she is writing these words both for the reader and for herself.

Finally, I cannot present Grandma's letters without sharing another cherished part of her writing process: the salutation. I am compelled to do so because I love her style and I think it reveals how one can transfer an antecedent genre. As Grandma did, most of us learn to start our familiar letters with some form of "Dear so-and-so." And while many of Grandma's letters do adhere to the traditional form, she is comfortable transforming the conventions to fit her mood, purpose, or audience. She might start a letter with "Dear sweet one," or "My Dearest Oriana," and she frequently includes the name of a family member or friend that she knows will be visiting at the time that the letter is received. Rarely does Grandma write to me without including the names of my husband and children in the salutation. While I'm certain she doesn't anticipate my one- and three-year-old reading the letter, her salutation is an acknowledgement that her thoughts are with our entire family. Even in her salutations, Grandma makes you feel like a part of something bigger.

Early on in her writing life, Grandma learned that what worked well for one type of letter (mother to daughter) was not a good fit for another (girlfriend to boyfriend/civilian to soldier). Although the physical and structural aspects of the letter invited her to see letter-writing as a singular genre, it was not long before she discovered that within one genre (as is almost always the case)

lie myriad subgenres. Likewise, she discussed in our conversations how she continues to make subtle changes in her letters depending on the person for whom, or purpose for which, she is writing. While this may seem obvious, it is a skill that many writers do not come by naturally.

Her process seems to unfold chronologically, but getting at how Grandma learned to write was not a straight path. Her initial response to my question “When did you first start writing letters?” was that she started writing when my grandpa left for the war. It was not until much later in the conversation, when she started explaining that after she and grandpa were married she continued writing to her mother, that she said, “Well, now I guess I told you a fib.” Until that point, the process of writing and learning to write from her mom had been overshadowed by her letters to Grandpa. Writing is influenced by so many factors outside of ourselves, that we frequently forget all the antecedent genres that influence our ability to successfully (or unsuccessfully) compose within a certain genre.

It was not until we started discussing *why* Grandma wrote her letters that we began to discover *how* she learned to write her letters. Immersed in the stories of the activities and people surrounding her writing, the memories of the *how* are easier to identify. If we want to really get at all the people, situations, and ideas that influence our writing, it helps to remember what motivated us to compose in each instance. Our writing is always built on past practice and shaped by our interactions with others. Grandma’s letters are wholly her own, but to a certain degree, they are of her mother and of her husband too—they are shaped by those whose own writing she took up and adapted to new situations and new genres of writing.

From Paper to Digital

“[T]he habitual use of any tool brings about ‘amplifications and reductions’ not only in the moment of use but in the physical and psychological structure of the user.”

—*Jody Shipka, Toward a Composition Made Whole*

I must confess, that when it comes to Grandma’s correspondences, I say *letter* regardless of whether the message was conveyed to me on a piece of paper or via email. But I thought both my understanding of these different mediums, as well as Grandma’s process in moving from one to the other, worthy of exploration.

Much like her initiation into letter writing, Grandma learned to write emails by talking to those around her. As personal computers became

more and more common in the early 2000s, Grandpa enrolled in a mini-course on personal computers for social and business use offered at the University of Illinois. Immediately following the course, he transferred all of their business and financial accounts into programs he designed on the computer. Anxious to share the wonders of the computer with his wife, the two of them set up an AOL account for Grandma.

The activity system influencing the way Grandma composes online continues to grow. Her writing influences and is influenced by a variety of individuals, acts, and ideas. She talks to her kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids about how to work within the email system, she emails questions, or she'll type her question into Google. Outside of her purposeful activities to shape her composing practice, more subtle influences—the spotty Internet connection, to whom she is writing (some friends of her generation are still written to by hand since they are not comfortable with the Internet), what device she is using (her iPad, phone, or PC)—and myriad other factors have a role in shaping her writing process.

Grandma's letters are an excellent example of how our writing is historically and culturally situated. They are influenced by her being of the WWII generation, by her relationship with those to whom she writes, by her work and family, and by the evolving cultural ideals and literary practices of the time. Grandma's transition from writing letters by hand to typing "letters" via email was prompted by a number of factors: physical, temporal, and generational. Her move to email offers insight into the ways in which transitions in the physicality of our writing process are not only acted on by the composer, but also act on the composer.

This examination of the physical relationship between an individual's body and her composition reveals itself fairly explicitly in my grandmother's transition from writing to emailing. The most obvious physical change between writing and typing is that Grandma can type an email faster than she can write a letter by hand. And while this factored in to her decision to switch to email, if it was simply a matter of writing speed and convenience, she could have typed and printed her letters long ago. It wasn't just the speed of the physical tools that swayed the transition from letters to emails; rather, her decision was influenced by how her physical process was translated into a textual artifact.

As part of the generation that grew up studying and practicing the visual art of writing, Grandma has always had beautiful handwriting (Figure

2). The visual aspect of her letters was something noted by all who received them. But she has dealt with hand tremors her entire life and they became more pronounced with each passing year. As her tremors became more prevalent, she was aware that one of the most important physical tools for her writing by hand was not as reliable a tool as it had been in the past. It is in this way that the tool (her hand) acted on and encouraged a change in the writer.

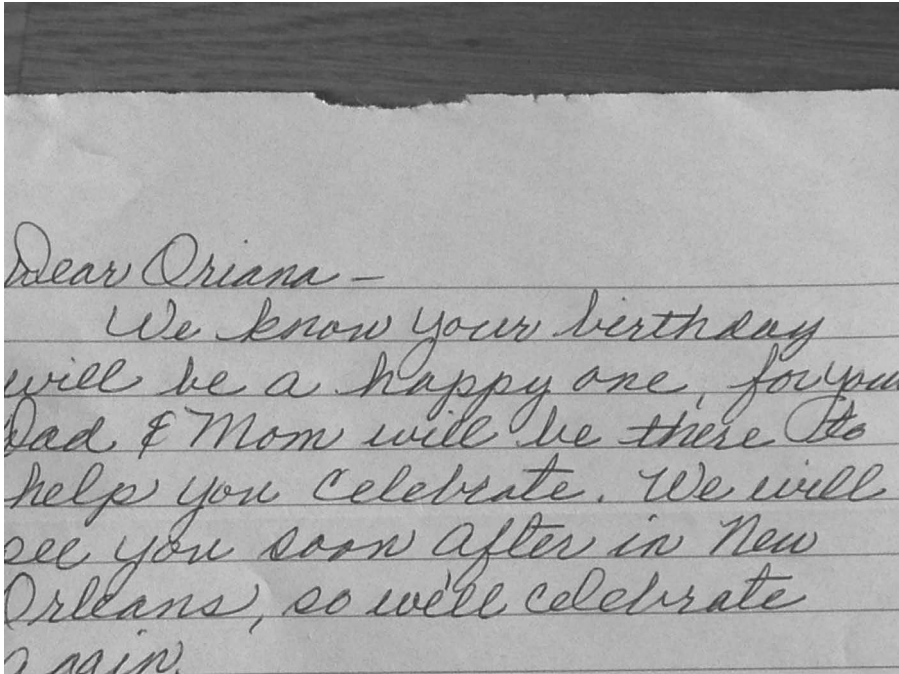


Figure 2: A snapshot of a handwritten letter sent to me from my grandmother.

Grandma was also cognizant of the roles of time and societal norms as she made the transition from letters sent through the United States Postal Service to emails sent via the web. The shift to electronic communication allowed for movement of the artifact between composer and audience to go from a matter of days to a matter of seconds. While this is not always of significant consequence, Grandma does like being able to congratulate a grandchild on an occurrence the same day she learns of the event. Birthday letters can now be composed on the day of the event rather than a week in advance. Additionally, as her writing has started to include recipients of younger generations, the reception of an email is one that many of Grandma's readers are familiar with and act on more readily (frequently by responding with his or her own email). Thus, the system moves faster from the point of initiation to the loopback.

Are All Activity Systems Created Equal?

“[L]etters display the signs of the distinct environments in which they were conceived.”

—*Rebecca Earle, Epistolary Selves*

Unlike many (myself included) who treat email as a different genre than letter-writing, Grandma approaches this change more as a transition in mode than a shift in genre. Her emails read almost exactly the same as her letters. While there are no longer pictures or maps embedded within the text, there is no mistaking that her electronic correspondence is, for all intents and purposes, a letter. She still begins her emails with an affectionate salutation before either commenting on something regarding the reader or, more likely, by explaining what she is up to at the moment. The body of the text is dominated by talk of family and work, threaded with humor, confidence-boosters, and advice. To end, she frequently explains what she's off to do next before closing with a traditional, letter-style sign-off.

So if it is faster, easier to write, easier (in many cases) to receive, and maintains many of its defining features, is Grandma's transition from letters to email a win-win? I'm not sure it is that simple. The truth is, for many of us, there is something in a handwritten letter. Grandma readily acknowledges that there is “just something different,” something wonderful, about receiving a letter that simply isn't the same with an email. It is something beyond the words or ideas contained in the letter; something that is tempting to peg as the purely physical aspects lost in digital communication: the opening of an envelope, the feel of the paper, the unique shape of the letters, the smudges of ink. CHAT works well here: from the production (the writer at a table with a piece of paper and a pen) to the ecology (the tattered envelope or letter that is “lost” en route), the activity system surrounding the letter is fraught with romanticized ideals. Yet I don't necessarily think one is better than the other. Email provides a number of advantages (such as ease of composing and delivery speed) that alter the activities around a “letter” composed in this format. So, it isn't really a matter of better or worse, but simply different.

What Can We Learn from Grandma?

“[A] body of private and potentially important texts exists that is only accessible to researchers with a personal connection to the source.”

—*Joyce Walker, The Methods and Methodologies of Qualitative Family Research*

Among many in academia, neither the composition nor study of everyday writing garners the same prestige as more traditionally “academic” forms of writing. Unless the sample of writing is composed by a famous (or infamous) figure or recounts an important event or period in history, it is treated as insignificant. Too frequently, we focus purely on content and ignore the inherent activities, processes, and participants involved in every piece of writing. When taken together, the composition and study of everyday writing is indeed a lens through which to view the events or ideas recounted in the document, but it also allows a glimpse into all the factors that led to the composition of that document, as well as what will occur as a result of that document’s trajectory.

So, what is learned from the study of one person’s letters? I believe that the answer can be as limited or limitless as our research allows. If I had simply read my grandmother’s letters for content, very few outside my family would even care to know what information I might extract. The exploration of everyday writing, or really any writing, invites us to go beyond an analysis of content. Universal applications are found in the systems working through and on the writing. My grandmother’s process of learning to write within a certain genre and form, and then adjusting, changing, and refining her process to fit the cultural, historical, familial, technological, and physical surroundings, are an example of how our writing-selves must be ever-ready to adapt. A key to all of these adjustments is that the writing—whether it is an email of congratulations or a handwritten letter of condolence—remains uniquely the writer’s. As writers, the more skills we transfer, tools we call upon, and resources we access, the more prepared we are to adapt to new writing situations while maintaining our individual writing identities.

Note to readers: With the exception of my own, all family names included in this article are pseudonyms.

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