

Taking the First Step: Discovering Genre through Blog Analysis

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In this article, Wilfinger explores genre analysis through the eyes of a non-English major. She introduces the terms “genre” and “genre analysis” in such a way as to make them less intimidating to other writers, while focusing on the genre of professional blogs to guide them through what is possibly their first formal analysis. She ends the article by discussing the benefits of genre studies.

What comes to mind when you hear the word “genre”? If you’re like me, you automatically think of broad categories most commonly seen in music, film, or literature. Romance, mystery, science fiction; pop, rock, metal; ring a bell? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines genre as “a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.”¹ This is probably the most common definition for genre, but it’s not the only one. Jordana Hall defines genre as a “common way of responding rhetorically to a situation.”² Make sense? Don’t worry; if you’ve never learned about genre from this perspective before, this definition probably sounds like gibberish. The important thing to notice is that we have two very different definitions of genre. Understanding genre is at the heart of this article.

Genre doesn’t need some long, convoluted definition full of big words. At its most basic level, genre is communication...any type of communication, written, oral, or visual, that is used to convey a message. Within the written scope, genres can range from academic journal articles to text messages and from promotional fliers to grocery lists. Oral genres can include job interviews, video chatting, and even simple conversations with friends or family. As for visual genres, any form of art, whether it’s a painting, a sculpture, or even a movie or TV show, is considered a genre. Each genre has its own mode of communication, as well as a specific list of features that go into the how and why it is produced.

So that's pretty straightforward, right? Now let's add in another word: analysis. Genre analysis. Take a deep breath. Genre analysis isn't as bad as it sounds. In fact, I'll go so far as to say you've already produced countless analyses over the years. You may not have actually written anything down, but you probably subconsciously looked at and thought about features of a genre before you created one (and yes, this would be considered "analyzing" that genre). Think about the first text message you ever sent. If you're like me, you probably have no clue what you wrote, but I'm sure you remember the tone. Your first text message was most likely to a friend, was some witty inside joke or comment, containing numerous abbreviations and emoticons and probably not ending with "sincerely, your good friend." My point is, even if you can't remember the content of your first text message, we can agree on the features of it.

I'll also point out that you were never "taught" these characteristics. You simply picked them up along the way. Genre analysis can be thought of similarly. You may not yet be trained, but I believe you can already unintentionally create genres by working through what are known as "antecedent genres." Antecedent genres are genres you have experienced before; therefore, you can use your previously formed ideas about them as a guide when looking at a new genre. Once you realize you have been inadvertently analyzing genre in your mind for years, the majority of the work is over; now all you need to do is attach reasoning to the choices you're making, and voilà! You're on your way to producing your first genre analysis.

Before we begin, note that there is not only one way to produce a genre analysis. While I prefer to investigate genre by analyzing its features, some students use a writing theory known as CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity Theory) to approach genre analysis by looking at the social and cultural aspects of a genre. Joyce Walker defines CHAT as "a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts), that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices."³ CHAT includes a list of terms that are useful in breaking down and investigating unfamiliar genres, and allows us to easily spot inconsistencies between our personal draft of a genre and the model we've used. But neither approach is the only way of producing a genre analysis, nor are these two the only methods.

Now that we all have a better understanding of genre and genre analysis, I will guide you through recognizing the features of a genre by highlighting the moves that we, as writers, do naturally. Let's begin with a common genre some of us are familiar with, a blog, and think about the length. Before we look at an example, you should note that there is a difference between a social blog written for your family and friends and a professional blog. Professional blogs are written by experts of a particular field and typically have one of two goals: (1) to present research on a current topic in the field and provide personal

thoughts on the subject to spark discussion, or (2) to share one's thoughts, opinions, and day-to-day activities. This article will examine the latter.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2007

● ● ● Why Students Are Good For Us

I just worked with a new batch of students today. They were great! Fresh and interested, this class has a sense of humor and it shows. They were joking and talking with each other like they'd been friends for years. More importantly, they were excited about starting something new and excited to be training. There's a sort of contact high you get being around so much positive energy. I love working with them.

I've read other people talk about how different professions "eat their young" and we do too in the lab sometimes - although not as much as you might think. There's usually a period of hazing, especially in areas with a lot of structure. I think what we do is a little different than what nurses do - our hazing is less based on displaced aggression and more based in a total discomfort with change so complete it is, at times, pathological. The fact that most of us are over 50 doesn't help much.

I try to help the students as much as I can. I tell them to ask their trainers how their doing because most of us are too shy to give feedback, even when they're driving us nuts. I also encourage them to be little happy rays of sunshine. Working amongst perfectionists, we forget to talk about the 85% of things that are good and focus only on the depressing (and all consuming at times) 15% that is less than ideal. One of my favorite people to work with is a wonderful woman who sprinkles praise in her conversation like the sugar covered raisins in raisin bran. People like her are all the more noticeable for their rarity.

I've also seem some great changes in local labs as more new people have come in - the more experienced folks are kinder (in some cases) to the newbies and really try to recruit them so there's one more person to cover Christmas. And new people means more tolerance for change - a slow shift. I'm looking forward to seeing how things are altered over the next ten years because I think replacing half the staff with energetic newbies will make it a much more exciting and fun place to work. When they ask questions, we'll be forced to peer into the darker more cobwebby bits of our memories for the answers (or to discover just how much you can find out at [labtests online](#).) The new crew also is increasingly international which should make the pot lucks exciting. Fun times ahead!

Posted by M.williams at 8:12 PM

● 0 comments 

Figure 1: Sample Blog ("Tales from the Clinical Lab")

Now let's take a look at Figure 1, a blog post from a medical laboratory scientist.⁵ By examining the features of this blog, we can see it is only a few paragraphs long, not much longer than a page, and definitely much shorter than a research article, which could easily be 10 pages long. Although this is the norm for many of the blogs I have seen, there can definitely be variation; some blog posts might be a paragraph, while others may be as long as a research article. Now let's think about why this is.

One explanation why online texts are typically shorter than texts produced in other formats is to hold the reader's attention. The Internet offers endless possibilities for information and entertainment, so why should a reader spend too much time on any particular blog posting? Short and concise blog postings have the greatest probability of being read. Also, texts appear more accessible if they are broken up into multiple short paragraphs. For example, a post that is one long rambling paragraph probably won't have

The image shows a screenshot of a blog post. At the top left, the title "Tales from the Clinical Lab" is displayed in a serif font. Below it is a tagline: "No one knows what happens down in the lab. Here's your chance to find out." To the right of the title is a decorative header with a grid of grey circles, one of which is solid black. Below the header, the date "THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2008" is shown. The main title of the post is "Creative Photography Entry Bone Marrow". Below this is a large, square, black and white microscopic image of bone marrow, showing various cell types and a marbled texture. To the left of the image is a sidebar with a smaller version of the "Tales From The Clinical Lab" logo. Below the logo is an "ABOUT ME" section with a small profile picture and the name "M. Williams", with a link to "View my complete profile". Below that is a "LABELS" section with a list of tags: "change (1)", "communication (1)", "microarrays (1)", "microbiology (1)", "research (1)", and "sample collection (1)". To the right of the image is the main text of the post, which reads: "I saw this creative photography site and thought, 'why not enter?' I just finished taking pictures of bone marrow for a hematology class and I took this photo in an area of the slide that you couldn't look at for morphology because everything's all mooshed together. But it was a good place to get a feel for the diversity of cell types and the presence of fat. It also kind of looks like marble. This was taken on an Olympus microscope under 100X oil emersion lenses and given a little touch of yellow in photoshop for contrast." At the bottom of the post, it says "Posted by M. Williams at 7:41 PM" and "12 comments" with a comment icon.

Figure 2: Sample Layout from "Tales from the Clinical Lab"⁶

many viewers, but if the same blog post is broken up into shorter paragraphs (like the one above), the text will look more appealing and will have a greater probability of being read. And there you have it! We've just identified our first genre feature—blog posts are usually short and made up of short paragraphs.

Now, let's move on to another feature of our blog genre as illustrated in Figure 2: layout and design.

We can easily see the author's design choices, including font, images, and background, but the first thing to consider is *why* the layout of a blog is important. A blog posting must be appealing to the eye so a viewer will take the time to browse the site. Think of the last time you used a search engine. No matter what you were looking for, the websites you ultimately clicked on were probably ones that were well organized, with the desired information near the top of the page. And there's our next genre feature—some people decide whether to read a blog based on the design of the blog alone. Next, let's use this information to write an actual section of our analysis (Note: a useful feature I have found is the use of headings and bullet points, although some writers might find paragraph style more effective for them.):

Layout

- Must be appealing to the eye so the viewer will take the time to browse the site; want to grab reader's attention; if the blog appears unorganized or messy people may not view or read it.
- Consider new styles of organization to catch the viewer's eye, such as different fonts, colors, and images.
 - Using crazy colors or fonts may distract the reader and detract from the author's overall message; try considering more subtle ways to change the design.
- Examples:
 - Bolding titles or headings, skipping a line between paragraphs, using different line spacing or margin sizes.
 - Different font and color choices can be made, but text should be easy to read.
 - Images should be relevant to the topic (in the screenshot above, the author includes an image of bone marrow taken on a microscope).

Although we could expand this analysis, there is no “right way” or “right depth” to produce a genre analysis. My advice is to examine a feature as

much as you can, but not to stress out about it too much. There will always be something left out. Genres can be immensely complicated and complex, but using some of the techniques outlined above to discover the boundaries and key features of the genre is a great starting point.⁷

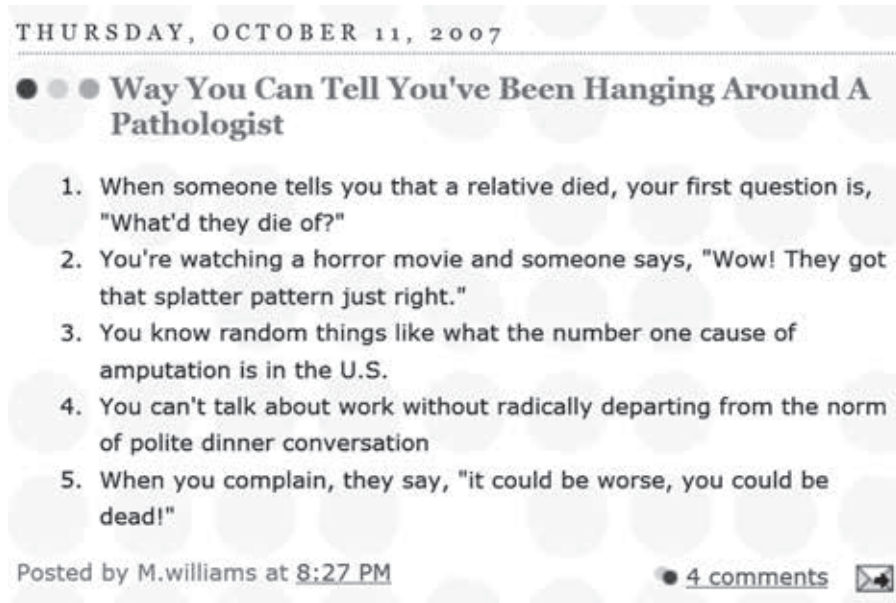


Figure 3: Language Example from “Tales from the Clinical Lab”⁸

Do you think you have the hang of things yet? Let’s take one final look at “Tales from the Clinical Lab” (Figure 3), this time analyzing language choices. We can easily pick out the tone from this excerpt. The author is trying to be

conversational and humorous, while still paying attention to misinterpretations and sarcasm. Notice the types of words the author uses, in particular contractions and exclamations like “Wow!”

Now take a look at this excerpt from the academic journal *Clinical Laboratory Science* (Figure 4). Unlike the blog post, the tone here is informational. Neither contractions nor exclamation points are used and the author includes a lot of jargon. As these two examples show, style and word choice can change immensely from genre to genre. Let’s write out our analysis:

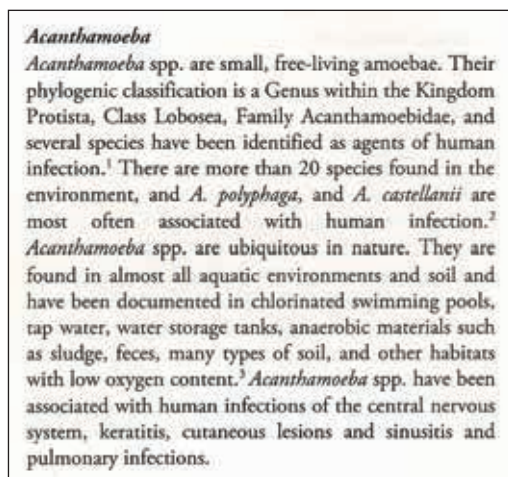


Figure 4: Sample Language from *Clinical Laboratory Science*⁹

Tone and style of writing

- Conversational tone—as if the author is talking to you, instead of at you (which is a feeling you get after reading some journal articles or textbooks).
 - Writer appears friendly, open to comments/discussion.
- Be aware of miscommunication—it is easy to misinterpret a person’s feelings, intentions, or purpose through an electronic medium; be wary of sarcasm, and always be courteous and polite to avoid these situations.
- Informal word choice, wide range of punctuation (exclamation points, all capital letters), slang, contractions, and emoticons are all acceptable.
 - Contrast with journal article or textbook where these types of language are not often found.
- Exclamation points and emoticons add a welcome and sociable element; document appears more accessible/laid back/friendly.
- No formal greeting/salutation, just “dive” right into the topic; no formal farewell (i.e. sincerely).
- Short, simple sentences free of more specialized jargon; many bloggers find this useful to spark discussions and further communication.

So there you have it: your first genre analysis! Well, part of it at least. Now that you have the basic technique down, you can use it to finish this analysis. In addition to the broad categories considered in this article, you can also investigate areas like audience and purpose, choice of medium, related genres, and CHAT considerations such as distribution and activity. For those of you who still may not be completely comfortable with CHAT, we can take another look at Walker’s article. She defines “activity” as “a term that encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create text. [This] can include conflict (attempts to disrupt or stop a text from being produced) or indifference (the refusal to participate).”¹⁰ To relate this to professional blogs, consider how typing and submitting texts electronically changes what authors write, keeping in mind that blogs are public. Additionally, authors must think about the pros and cons of writing anonymously (i.e. under a screen name), whether they are comfortable providing personal contact information over the Internet, and even whether or not they truly have the time and energy to update a blog regularly.

It is important to note that genre analysis is more than just pointing out features and characteristics. Everything that goes into our writing is dependent

on our particular place in time and our own particular culture. One of the most useful aspects of genre analysis is that it allows us to adapt as genres change. This is especially evident in online blogs because the Internet is a constantly changing and evolving medium. Years ago, blogging was a completely unknown genre, while today it can actually be considered a profession (consider Perez Hilton or Jared Eng¹¹). The analysis we just put together to describe the ins and outs of writing a blog is probably different from one that could have been done five years ago, and will most certainly be different from one written five years from now. Perhaps résumés will evolve to an online forum, where employers will be looking more for a sense of your individual voice than your statistics and affiliations. On the other hand, blogging may even disappear altogether to be replaced by other social media sites. However it changes, analysis of the social aspects of a genre can be used to gain a better understanding of language and culture within a field at large. Perhaps even more importantly, genre analysis can help writers succeed in new writing situations, where we are often left on our own to navigate new conventions.

Endnotes

1. "Genre." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. An Encyclopedia Britannica Company.
2. Jordana Hall discusses her definitions of certain literary terms in "Genre Terminology" from the 2011 English 145 *Resource Compendium*. <http://isuwriting.com/resources/program-documents/>.
3. Walker, Joyce R. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* 1 (2010). <http://isuwriting.com/resources/grassroots/>. For more information about CHAT, including full definitions and uses of production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology, see Walker.
4. Williams, M. "Why Students Are Good For Us." *Tales from the Clinical Lab*. 11 Sept. 2008. <http://clsmt.blogspot.com/>.
5. A medical laboratory scientist (MLS) works in the laboratory of a hospital running the tests ordered by doctors. If you have ever had blood drawn and later heard your doctor referencing things like cell counts or hemoglobin levels, an MLS was responsible for running those tests on your blood and providing your doctor with that information.
6. Williams, M. "Creative Photography Entry Bone Marrow." *Tales from the Clinical Lab*. 04 Sept. 2007. <http://clsmt.blogspot.com/>.

7. Walker talks a little bit about the complexity of genre, and the rewards of using CHAT on page 72.
8. Williams, M. “Way You Can Tell You’ve Been Hanging Around A Pathologist.” *Tales from the Clinical Lab*. 11 Oct. 2007. <http://clsmt.blogspot.com/>.
9. Fydryszewski, Nadine A, and Peter H Hanna. “Acanthamoeba Keratitis—A Diagnostic Challenge.” *Clinical Laboratory Science* Vol. 24 No. 4 (2011): 202-207.
10. Walker.
11. Perez Hilton and Jared Eng, authors of the websites www.perezhilton.com and www.JustJared.com, are American bloggers both known for posting celebrity news and gossip.



Kate Wilfinger is a senior Medical Laboratory Science major at ISU hoping to go onto pharmacy school where she can continue to avoid “real life” until she’s at least 28. On Wednesdays, after class, Kate rescues blind puppies and orphans from Disney villains. She can create elaborate four course meals using only a spice grinder and a toaster oven. Years ago, Kate discovered the meaning of life, but forgot to write it down. She is a master of disguise, an expert ice cream scooper, and an outlaw in Peru. She is the most interesting woman in the world.