

The Importance of Understanding Genre . . . and Memos

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In this article, Safran explores the reasons for researching and understanding a genre before creating it. Part of this process includes acknowledging the variances in expectations for various genres—they are not all formatted like essays! She conducts this exploration through a narration of her own experience learning the genre of the memo.

For my first-ever, and required, seminar in my master’s program at Central Michigan University, I was asked to write a research paper on a topic that had *something* to do with both my major (ethnic literature) and the field of rhetoric and composition. Well, I was comfortable with the genre of the research paper (a.k.a., an essay). I had to write MANY essays throughout my college career. So, I did not worry about that part of the final project. However, my professor then told us, “You must include a writer’s memo with your research paper.” I had NEVER constructed a memo before; therefore, I had no idea where to start, what to do, what it looked like, and so on. He went on to tell us that the point of the memo, for his class, was to explain to those reviewing our research papers what issues we wanted them to consider, such as any problems that we thought we had in our papers.

I had *heard* of the term “memo” before, but only on TV shows and movies. However, I never had to create, nor ever read, a memo. Yet, instead of asking for help or even looking up how to create a memo on the internet, I just put a “memo” together the way that I figured it should be put together. I did not know the type of diction and tone that I should use. I was unaware of the expected formatting and structure of the memo. I figured I knew who the

audience would be (those reviewing my paper) and I knew that the purpose was to explain any problems that I thought I had in my paper. With both the audience and purpose of my memo in mind, I assumed that I did it “right.” My assumptions were wrong.

After our review session, my professor came back and told me that the content in my memo was good, but it was “not a memo.” My content was good because a memo serves as a way for problems to be discussed or as an outlet for any new information that needs to be added. I had done that. I had talked about what issues I thought that I had in my paper, and I provided information to those reviewing my paper as to what I wanted them to look at. However, I had not provided the information in the *genre* of the memo. I had created my own genre of some type. I used long paragraphs, with indentations, and I double-spaced it as I would an essay. I was very wrong with my assumptions in the memo’s formatting conventions. Before I started my memo, all I had to do was Google some examples and see what the memo “looked like,” or rather, how it was laid out and formatted, and so on; yet, I did not do that. I just jumped in and created an “anti-memo.” After that, I decided that I wanted to learn what exactly the genre of the memo *should be*, for future reference.

So, because I wanted to learn for the next time, just in case I was asked again to create one, I Googled the term “memo.” I was confronted with site after site that explained what a memo is and why we use them. However, I finally came across Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) website (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>) and decided to look up their explanation of a memo. (Purdue’s OWL had helped me with citations and formatting for my research papers, so I figured I would give it a try.) This was the best thing that I could have done! I was provided with a plethora of information of what is included in the memo in terms of specific content, how it is formatted, what type of diction and tone to use, and who the typical audience is, as well as the purpose. It also provided me with examples to mimic in order to learn the genre. I learned that the memo’s purpose is to draw attention to problems or to help solve problems, similar to the goal for the writer’s memo I was asked to draw up for my class. They can also be used to convey additional information to their audience. The audience of the memo will be anyone that the information is to be sent to. For my assignment, it was to the professor of the course, as well as my classmates.

After perusing the site’s section on a memo, I learned that the information that goes on the top of the memo includes the following sections: to, from, date, and subject. The first three (to, from, and date) are pretty self-explanatory, but the “subject” section was difficult in that I had to understand what actually

went into the memo before I could give it a “subject.” However, before I could even start to include content in the memo, I had to understand what it looked like, or rather, how it was formatted.

I learned that the memo is composed of sections (or rather, segments). These segments are not indented, like paragraphs would be in an essay. They look like blocks of text. The first section of the memo is called the opening segment. This segment lets the reader know what exactly the purpose of the memo is, or why he/she is writing the memo. So for my assignment, I should have explained, in my first segment, why I was writing to my professor and classmates. I could have said something like: “I am writing to you today to ask for your help in revising my paper,” or something along those lines.

I then learned that the next section is called the context segment. This segment provides the context, or background, of the memo. What I should have included in my memo, had I understood what the genre called for, is some kind of overview of my paper: “Within my paper, I am discussing the ways in which multiethnic literature could function in the composition classroom. However, I am having problems with X, Y, and Z. Any feedback on these areas will be helpful.” I should have given my classmates an overview of my paper and the problems that I wanted to address, and why.

The next segment is called the Task segment and this is where I would have explained to my classmates what I already did, in my paper, to help with my issues, i.e., “I have already attempted to reorganize my essay to help it flow better, but I am still having issues with the organization.” Then, following this segment is an optional segment: the summary segment. This is optional only because some memos will be short, like the one that I was asked to write for my course, and others are longer—it depends on their specific purpose for said memo. For the longer ones, I learned that it is necessary to include a summary to reorient the audience as to why you are writing to them—basically, it is a recap of the main points of the memo. I did not have to include this segment in my memo because it was fairly short, so the audience did not need reminding of the main issues.

I then learned about the final two segments. The discussion segment is the longest of all the segments because it is where you describe the most information to the audience, i.e., what you have found to help with the issue that you are having and any recommendations, etc., for the issues at hand. For my issues within my paper, I could have explained to my classmates what other problems I was having with my paper and what I could do to help those, and then request feedback for my suggestions to improve my paper.

The last segment is called the closing segment. This section is where you thank the audience for reading and request an action from them. So, for my memo, I should have written something like: “Thank you for taking the time to read my essay. Please suggest ways that I can improve upon my organization, tone, and in-text citations.”

After I read through all of this information on memos and their formatting, I realized that the reason my memo was so “wrong” was because it looked more like an essay than a memo. I was using the information that I had about a previous genre to create the new genre, or rather, an antecedent genre. An antecedent genre is a genre that can be used to draw from in order to create a new genre. I was used to creating essays and I drew from my knowledge of the expectations of essays in order to create my memo. I had paragraphs as opposed to segments, because I indented them. I also made them all flow together, rather than as blocks of text. Lastly, I double-spaced the memo, when it should have been single-spaced. And of course, I did not include *any* of the segments that a memo calls for.

While learning how to write an essay is important, understanding the importance of genre is even greater. If I would have considered “thinking outside of the box” of the essay, I would have understood that I should research a genre in order to understand how to follow its expectations and guidelines, in terms of diction/tone, organization, structure, formatting, purpose, audience, and so on. Rather, while I could have drawn from my knowledge of the essay (an antecedent genre), I also needed to understand the memo as a new genre, with its own expectations and rules. Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff explain that our knowledge of a genre (for example, a memo), is dependent on our “mental framework [or understanding] for how to read [that genre]” (48). If I would have understood that I needed to “read” that genre in order to understand it before I created it, I would not have had to re-do my makeshift memo—I would have adhered to the expectations of the genre. Thus, understanding the concept of genre and how to analyze genres is important to know *before* attempting to produce any piece of writing or attempting to create any genre.

I was so excited once I learned how to create a memo that I decided to try to do one for my officemate, Sarah. I was tired of her always leaving our office a mess, so I decided to write her a light-hearted memo that requested she clean the office (she knew it was a joke, but I also think she took it seriously as well, because our office stayed clean after the memo!).

I made sure to follow the segments, as well as the formatting, that I learned about and this is what I came up with:

MEMO

TO: Sarah Smith

FROM: Jessica Safran

DATE: October 27, 2011

SUBJECT: Cleanliness of our office

[This was my opening segment]

I am writing to you about the messiness of our office. It is difficult to open our office door without having to shove past piles of student papers, articles, and books. Also, I have been finding it difficult to sit at my desk because you always place your stuff (book bag, purse, articles, highlighters, white-out, etc., etc., etc.) on my desk and vice versa. Lastly, our floor looks like a paperclip tornado struck our office. As can be seen from the above-listed issues, we need to rectify the situation in some way, i.e., you (and me) need to be less messy.

[This was my context segment]

We have known each other for a little over a year now, and I have remained quiet as I endured the disaster-of-an-office that you have created. I have stepped over the piles and piles of reading material, dodged falling books from the bookshelf, kicked paperclips out of my way, and put the caps back onto the drying-out highlighters. I have supported your messiness by mimicking your disorganization, but I realize now that only added to our dire situation. We now need to sit down and figure out why you (I already know why I am, so we do not need to discuss that) are so messy and how we can clean our office.

[This was my task segment]

In order to help with our cleaning process, I have decided to become more organized. I bought files to organize my own articles and other readings. I have also bought a desk-organizer that allows me to place my writing utensils into it so that they are not rolling all over my desk. Lastly, I bought us an additional bookshelf so that we can place our books on that, instead of in front of our office door, like a barricade.

[This was my discussion segment]

There are many ways that we can go about beginning the cleaning process of our office. First, we can throw away, or recycle, any reading materials, cartons, Subway wrappers, water bottles, and plastic bags that we no longer need. Next, we can rearrange our office so that we have more room for the bookshelves, instead of stacking the books into open corners and in front of our door. We can also place the posters and calendars, as well as the clock that are thrown about on the floor, onto the walls, where they belong for our enjoyment and organization of time. Lastly, maybe we can sit down and have a conversation about the deeper reasons that we are so messy and disorganized.

[This was my closing]

Thank you for reading this memo. After reading this, I would like you to do the following: become less messy, clean the office of your messiness, and become more clean and organized in your mannerisms. I will be glad to discuss this with you in further detail, once I see you set this memo onto your desk and turn to look at me.

Sarah thought that this memo was hilarious; however, I shifted my tone and diction (word choice) to my audience, which was Sarah. I knew that I was writing a “funny” memo to my office mate and friend, so I could be less professional in my diction. However, in terms of the memo that I had to write for my course (when I did not follow the memo genre), I should have had a more professional (formal) tone and diction, as the purpose of that memo was to request help with my writing process and betterment of my paper. Within the genre of memos, there can be a lot of variation in terms of style, tone, formatting, and so on, depending on the audience, context, situation, setting, and so forth. This, too, needs to be considered before attempting any genre.

While Sarah and I had a cleaner office for the remaining time that we were in our master’s program together, from the memo that I learned to create and then re-created, I also learned that it is important to understand a genre before attempting to create it. My first memo was a mess because I did not take the time to Google it or go to the library, to see what it “looked” like. I also did not take the time to learn its formatting, structure, and expected tone and diction, or its function and purpose. Because I did not “teach” myself about the genre before I created it, or even give myself a chance to “read” it and understand the memo as a genre, it was a disaster. So, in addition to learning how to construct a memo, I also learned that understanding the importance of genres and their individual functions is necessary.

Work Cited

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



Jessica Safran is a doctoral student in English Studies at Illinois State University. She is focusing on American literature with an emphasis in contemporary, ethnic literatures. While she still must create essays for her education and her career, she has been asked to create a memo two more times since the above story. She is an avid hockey fan and believes that the Detroit Red Wings will *always* beat the Chicago Blackhawks. Michigan is her home state.

