

Public Art: Investigating *Logos*

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In this article, Hentrich explores public art as a genre on the campus of Illinois State University. She walks through her journey of the writing process as she shows how one sculpture in particular, named *Logos*, is a genre and communicates a message to all who pass by.

My first day of college. Straightened hair. New backpack. Phone in one hand and a water bottle in the other. I walked to my English class feeling nervous, but excited, too. I crossed the pavement and headed to Stevenson Hall at Illinois State University. Before reaching my destination, a circular bed of flowers with a tall, interesting sculpture lay in my tracks (see Figure 1). I wasn't exactly sure what it was supposed to be, but to me, it looked like a giant gold swirl. I continued on my way and didn't think much about it. However, passing by the sculpture every day sparked my curiosity. For some reason, it intrigued me, and I wanted to find out more—specifically, what exactly the sculpture was supposed to be.

In my English class that semester, we learned about the world of writing and how the writing process works. The writing process can include why we write, how we write, and what we write about. We also learned what genres are and how they play a large role in our writing and our daily lives—even if we do not realize it! Taking a moment to examine all of the elements that make writing happen helps us make sense of a genre and helps us make sense of the world. So, I decided that I wanted to dive deeper and write about this interesting sculpture that refused to leave my mind. To begin my



Figure 1: The sculpture named *Logos*.

own writing process, I needed to examine the sculpture as a genre. Doing so will allow us to understand this piece of art in a deeper way. After reading this, maybe you will be able to look at the sculptures on your college campus as a genre, too, and see them in a way you haven't before.

How Is This Sculpture a Genre? (Let's Investigate)

Think about a time when you saw something and didn't know what it was. For example, maybe you saw a strange object on your kitchen counter, or maybe you went to a museum and saw a strange painting. Regardless of what it was, you probably had a bunch of questions running through your mind. Well, when I first saw the gold sculpture, I had questions too. What is it? What is it supposed to be? What's its meaning? What's its purpose? Who put it there? Why put it there? I didn't realize it then, but the sculpture that I was questioning was a kind of genre. A **genre** is "a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make

that production recognizable” (“Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program”). To explain it in another way, you can say that a genre is a text (or production) that conveys meaning. If you think about it, the gold sculpture had to get there somehow and someway. Somebody had to create the idea. Somebody had to design it. Somebody had to physically build it and put it there. Such a big and detailed project had to have been made for a specific purpose. The sculpture is not sitting at Illinois State University for no reason. It has to possess some kind of meaning, and that’s what makes it a genre.

After realizing that I was looking at a genre, I still needed to know what *kind* of genre it was. In order to do this, I had to dive into some good ole genre research. **Genre research** means to find the norms of a genre. And in order to find the norms of a genre, you must identify its conventions, or more specifically, its genre conventions. **Genre conventions** are features of a genre, or all of the elements that go into building or recognizing a text. Identifying the conventions (or features) of something can help you recognize what kind of genre it is. Therefore, I began my genre research by observing the sculpture’s genre conventions. These were the conventions I found: it is outside, very large, most likely made of metal, tall, gold in color, swirl shaped, and on public display. Noting these conventions helped me recognize that I was looking at some sort of art piece. However, I still needed help pinpointing what kind of art this sculpture was, so I continued my genre research by going to our good friend Google for assistance. I typed “sculptures on college campuses” into the search bar. I surfed the web for some time; I clicked on different links and images and ended up discovering that the gold sculpture was a type of “Public Art.” Public art is an expression and response of an artist, which is placed in a public setting in order to form community (“What is Public Art?”). By doing genre research and recognizing the sculpture’s conventions, I was able to connect and compare it to the information I found online. It allowed me to figure out that the genre of the sculpture is simply Public Art.

I still had more investigating to do. Now that I’ve discussed the gold sculpture as a genre, it’s time to perform a bit of content research. **Content research** is “any kind of research a person might do to gain knowledge they plan to use in some kind of production” (“Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program”). In other words, you can say that it is the research you do about your specific topic. There is often confusion between genre research and content research. So, to be clear, when we did genre research on the gold sculpture, we were simply researching to find out what *kind* of genre we were exploring. With content research, we are narrowing it down and researching for specific information about it. This is where we can tackle questions like: What is the name of the sculpture? Who made it? Who designed it? What

does it mean? So, let's conduct some content research and dig up the answers to these questions!

Revealing its Meaning . . .

I spent time doing content research and found fascinating answers to all of my questions. I performed this content research by beginning with our good friend Google again. I tried to find out as much information about the sculpture this way. I also made an appointment with my English professor to help guide me through my research and writing process. She ended up pointing me to an extremely useful resource which contained an abundance of information and history on the gold sculpture. I wish to share what I discovered with you now.

First of all, lo and behold! The gold sculpture's real name is *Logos* (I bet my title makes a lot more sense now). *Logos* is, in fact, a flame. The sculpture was built in 1969 in remembrance of Adlai E. Stevenson II (Marusarz). Hence, it is located near the well-known Stevenson building. Stevenson was a former governor of Illinois but also an overall supported statesman (Marusarz). He was especially praised for his respected and role model-like character. The Cold War was occurring during this time, so the creators of the statue hoped to represent Stevenson's admirable character, which was one of optimism and hope (Marusarz). A man who played a big role in designing and sculpting *Logos* was Henry Mitchell. While planning the design, Mitchell demanded for the sculpture to be "a symbol of his lofty ideals" and not a "statue of Stevenson's personage" (Marusarz). I personally think that it was a unique idea to create an art piece that symbolized him, rather than making a statue of Stevenson himself. One more interesting fact is that there originally used to be a fountain around the flame, which is why the sculpture's original name was "the Adlai E. Stevenson Memorial Fountain" (Marusarz). They later changed it to "The Flame" and then changed it for a third time to *Logos*. So, as we can see, the sculpture went through quite a transformation. It felt very rewarding to learn about the sculpture that I passed by every day while going to class. By examining the sculpture's genre through genre research, its genre conventions, and content research, the answers that I always wanted were revealed!

Diggin' Deeper

To learn more about public art and the sculpture *Logos*, I decided to walk around the Illinois State campus to find other public art pieces. I knew it would be helpful to compare *Logos* with other sculptures around campus. By

doing so, I was performing some genre analysis. Genre analysis is similar to genre research; however, they are still different. **Genre analysis** is the activities involved in looking closely at a particular genre (multiple samples and variations) and investigating all the different features that might be present. Some key words/phrases in that definition are “multiple samples,” “variations,” and “all the different features,” By examining other pieces of public art, not just *Logos*, I could become more knowledgeable in the understanding of the genre I was writing and researching in. I could learn more about the different features that could be presented in public art.

While I was looking at the other pieces on campus, I immediately noticed that a few of them had some sort of visual plaque or writing presented. Most of the art that I saw did not include this, so I took special notice for the few that did. For example, one piece that I came across was that of a large metal hand and directly below it was engraved writing (see Figure 2). My first thought was . . . and you guessed it . . . why does this art piece have writing included while others don't? This hand sculpture doesn't have too much information on it, but it at least shows the public its title and an



Figure 2: A public art piece at ISU with information engraved.

indication for why it's there. I went back to *Logos* to double check for any type of writing, engraving, or sign, but, yet again, I found nothing. Overall, this experience showed me the importance of genre analysis. By comparing and contrasting *Logos* with other variations of public art, I discovered more about this genre. It also opened up an opportunity for me to ask more questions and to continue my journey in genre research.

Let's Open a Tool Box and Keep CHATting

To help us further understand the genre of Public Art, we can use a handy dandy tool called **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)**. In the Writing Program at ISU, we think of CHAT as a huge box containing specific categories (or tools, if you will) that “help us understand a genre in practical ways that will impact our writing” (Walker). By using ISU's version of CHAT as a framework, we can understand more about the genres around us. There are many terms that relate to literate activity, but I would like to focus on two CHAT terms in particular: representation and reception.

I would like to first mention representation. **Representation** is “related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it)” (“Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program”). With the *Logos* sculpture, there are many ways in which we can think of representation. Thinking back on the history of the art piece, all those who participated in the making of the sculpture (Mitchell, Stevenson's family and friends, and others) heavily considered the statue's representation while creating it. It's very obvious how much thought the creators put into *Logos*. They spent a lot of time discussing and debating what the sculpture should mean, what it should be named, what it should look like, how it should be made, etc. They conceptualized and planned what they were producing in a thoughtful way. They had to go through a very specific process in order to finish the project. The creators of *Logos* gave an immense effort and put time into making the sculpture what it is today. I'm sure they hoped that its beauty and meaning would live on and on.

After investigating *Logos* and its rich history, I wanted to explore how it lives on today. Now that we understand what the sculpture means, we can consider what it means to others. What does the public think when they see *Logos*? What do they think it is? This is where I would like to mention a second CHAT term: reception. **Reception** is “how a text is taken up and used by others” (“Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program”). It considers how people receive a text and what they think about it. There are a variety of people who pass by *Logos* every day (teachers, students,

visitors, children, etc.); however, I wanted to focus particularly on what the statue means to students. I went around the campus and interviewed several students about the statue. I asked every person the same three questions:

- Have you ever wondered about the statue?
- What do you think the statue is?
- What do you think it means? (What do you think it symbolizes?)

Here are some of the responses I received:

1. “Yeah I’ve wondered about it. It looks like a swirly stick . . . and I have no idea what that would mean.”
2. “Yes I have! It looks like a candle, and maybe that symbolizes how we can flourish and reach our potential.”
3. “Yes, I think it’s supposed to be a flame? That could symbolize enlightenment or learning.”
4. “I’ve thought about it before. Maybe it’s a feather. It could mean that we come together as one.”
5. “Yes but I could never figure out what it was.”

After interviewing each person, I recognized something that they all had in common. I received various responses, but they all answered yes to the first question. Each student said that they’ve wondered or at least thought about *Logos* before. This is a good thing! I believe the creators of *Logos* would have appreciated that students are thinking about the sculpture or at the very least, noticing it. Looking back on all of the responses, I got a wide variety of answers. A few of them were almost spot-on! Even if they didn’t get it 100%, they were on the right track. However, I would say that there were more people who didn’t know what the statue was or its meaning. Most of the people that I interviewed thought about their answers really hard and sounded uncertain while speaking to me. I wasn’t surprised by this, of course, because at the beginning of my journey I wasn’t completely sure what it was either. To me, this can uncover some difficult questions that I think are important to consider. What’s the point of the statue being there if very few people understand its exact meaning? With no plaque or sign, how are students supposed to easily discover the sculpture’s name or rich history? However, one way to look at it is that *Logos* is open for interpretation. Even if one does not know everything about it, they can use their imagination and create their own idea of what it means to them. Another observation that I would like to point out is that after every single one of my interviews, each student asked me to reveal the sculpture’s name and meaning. I never

asked them if they wanted to know: they always beat me to it! This was obviously because they were genuinely curious! Public art like *Logos* can be viewed through so many different perspectives. Each person has their own reception of it. To one student, *Logos* may simply be a piece of art that lives on their campus and adds to its beauty. To another student, it may spark their interest and cause them to ponder its meaning. And to another, *Logos* may have a personal meaning to them. Overall, by using the CHAT terms representation and reception, we can see how our understanding of *Logos* can grow even further.

Conclusion

When I began to write and research *Logos* as a genre, I did not realize how many elements played a role in producing such a piece of work! Literate activity is always around us and communicates in ways we may not realize. *Logos* may be a normal piece of public art; however, it is much more than that—it speaks to everyone who passes by. Exploring *Logos* as a genre with the use of CHAT helped me make sense of my journey through the writing process.

Works Cited

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