



Writing Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay: How to Approach Writing Across Genres

*This handout defines and discusses **the importance of genre** when it comes to our reading and writing practices. By building **awareness of genre** and **skills of genre analysis**, you will be able to identify the **rhetorical choices** an author makes to communicate their purpose and connect with their intended audience. You will also learn to apply genre analysis to your own writing by considering how the genre you're engaging in impacts your own choices as a writer.*

What is genre?

Genre, in its simplest definition, is a **category of creative expression**. Whether we are aware of it or not, everyday we are responding to different genres. When we pick up our phone to read an email, send a text, watch a movie, read a book, work on a paper for a class, we are engaging with different genres. You probably already know many genres without even realizing it. A useful exercise is to list off as many types of genres you can think of. As you'll see in the table below, there are genres and also subgenres in each category.

Film	Music	Writing: Literature/ Fiction		Writing: Non-Fiction	Writing: Academic
-Romantic- Comedy -Thriller -Horror -Comedy -Mystery -Science- Fiction -Document- ary	-Jazz -Classical -Hip-hop -Rap -Rock -Folk -Metal -Punk -Blues -Techno	Poetry -Lyric -Elegy -Haiku -Ekphrastic Novels -Young-adult -Mystery -Drama -Science-fiction -Thriller -Magical realism	Short Fiction Drama -Comedy -Tragedy	Journalistic Writing -Opinion-editorial -News report -Book/Movie Reviews -Travel Guides Creative Non-Fiction -Personal narrative -memoir -Biography Social Media -Blog writing -Instagram post	-Research report -Annotated Bibliography -Literary Analysis -Book review -Conference paper -Abstract -Conference/Article proposal -Ethnography

Why do we care about genre?

You may be wondering why genre is important to consider when it comes to your own reading and writing practice. Often, when we think of writing in a college context, we first think about the “five paragraph essay” that is commonly taught in high school. But as we grow as writers, we learn there are so many kinds (or genres) of writing that exist beyond the “five paragraph essay” that challenge you to write for different audiences, purposes, and styles.

Each genre has its own particular purpose, conventions, and intended audience. In short, **genre informs the purpose of a piece of writing and impacts how a piece of writing is composed**. The more you can practice writing in different genres, the more you will learn that it is critical to consider the **purpose of the genre** you’re writing in (i.e., is the genre of writing intended to persuade? Inform? Describe?). In addition to purpose, it’s critical to consider the intended **audience of the genre** (are you writing for an academic audience? A public audience? A policy maker? A community organization?). Considering these elements—**purpose, audience, and conventions**—will help you better identify different genres and learn how to use your own writing to explore new genres.

What is genre analysis?

Genre analysis refers to the process of analyzing how a particular piece of writing and/or media engages with and fulfills the purpose of a particular genre. Genre analysis is often where you learn about different approaches and creative choices authors make to fulfill the purpose of a given genre alongside their own unique purpose as a creator.

Goals of genre analysis:

- **Identify** the purpose of a particular genre (i.e., what that genre is trying to accomplish)
- **Consider** *how* texts are composed within that genre (i.e., what choices an author makes to reach their intended audience and fulfill the genre’s purpose).

As you learn to write across academic genres, you will learn to identify the purpose of a genre and analyze the particular choices—or “rhetorical moves”—writers make to fulfill that purpose. According to the writers of “Make Your Move: Writing in Genres,” analyzing the **“rhetorical moves”** in a piece of writing refers to **“the process of identifying moves in multiple samples of a genre, looking for patterns across these texts, and thinking critically about the role these moves play in helping the genre function”** (220).

Learning how to analyze an author’s rhetorical choices in relation to genre will both help you read a piece critically as well as help you when you are asked to write in a new and perhaps unfamiliar genre.

The table below can help break down genre analysis into different steps. Tip: When reading or writing in a new genre, it is helpful to read several examples of texts within that particular genre to help you identify shared characteristics and conventions.

Step 1: Identify the Genre	Step 2: Identify genre’s social purpose	Step 3: Identify the genre’s intended audience	Step 4: Identify rhetorical choices the author makes to achieve the social purpose of the genre
Email	To communicate with a particular person for either personal or professional reasons	Typically one or a few other people in the author’s immediate or proximate communities	Addressed to the people intended to receive the email. Depending on the purpose and intended readers, written in either a personal or informal tone.
Opinion-Editorial Article	Communicate an author’s informed position on a topic and/or issue relevant to the present moment.	General audience/ public (though, depending on where the article is published, might be more geared to a particular population).	Often balances author’s experience and opinion with outside sources and other Op-Ed articles on the topic. Shorter in length and includes a title that clues the reader into the argument.
Personal narrative	Share an author’s perspective and/or understanding of a topic by describing an author’s personal experiences and reflections on that experience.	General audience, people in the writer’s community, people also affected by the topic the author is engaging with.	Typically written in first person, uses vivid imagery/description, often uses personal experience as the “evidence” to help the author make a broader claim.
Research Report	Report on a particular research topic, including sharing the methodology, data, and conclusions with a wider audience	Typically an academic audience specific to the discipline that the topic engages in, including sociologists, historians, educators, anthropologists, psychologists.	Includes different sections that clearly reflect both the research process (such as methodology, data) and research findings. Written using a formal tone and includes standardized citations using MLA or APA.

How to Approach Writing in a New Genre:

When asked to write in a genre that is new to you—whether for a class or perhaps for work—you can use the following questions to guide you:

Step 1: Perform a genre analysis:

1. What genre am I asked to write in?
2. What is the social purpose/ intended action of this particular genre?
3. What is the intended audience for this genre?
4. What conventions are commonly found in this genre?
 - a. Recommended: Read a few pieces from this particular genre, noting what choices writers make to fulfill the genre's purpose and to connect with the intended audiences.
 - b. Note: No two pieces in a given genre are the same! While you will notice there are similarities and conventions that connect different pieces in a genre, each writer uniquely and creatively approaches writing in any genre—it's up to you to make your own choices that you think will best fulfill your purpose in relation to the broader aims of the genre.

Step 2: As you begin to draft your own piece, ask yourself:

1. Given what I know about this genre, what do I want to convey to my readers ?
2. Who is my intended audience? Why is this genre appropriate for reaching my intended audience?
3. Given what I know about the stylistic and formal conventions of this genre, how will I structure my writing and use language to persuade/connect with my audience?
4. Based on what I noticed in the other pieces written in this genre, what might I want to do differently? How do I uniquely want to approach writing in this genre?

Additional Resources:

Dirk, Kerry. "Navigating Genres." *Writing Spaces*, vol. 1, 2010,

<https://parlormultimedia.com/writingspaces/past-volumes/navigating-genres/>. Accessed 28 Feb 2025.

Jacobson, Brad, et al. "Make Your Move: Writing in Genres." *Writing Spaces*, vol. 4,

2021, <https://parlormultimedia.com/writingspaces/make-your-move-writing-in-genres/>. Accessed 28 Feb 2025.

Kennell, Vicki R. "Questions for Genre Analysis." *Purdue Owl*, 2020,

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/graduate_writing/documents/Questions-for-Genre-Analysis.pdf. Accessed 28 Feb 2025.

"Genres of Writing," *Duke University: Thompson Writing Program*,

<https://twp.duke.edu/twp-writing-studio/resources-students/genres>. Accessed 28 Feb 2025.

Created by Maxine Krenzel (March 2025)