A Genre Approach to Writing Assignments

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In their recent article, "Materiality and Genre in the Study of Discourse Communities," Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff maintain that genre analysis can enable outsiders to a discourse community "to connect what community members know and do with what they say and how they say it—their language practices" (542). Genre analysis, the article emphasizes, fosters understanding of how "'lived textuality' plays a role in the lived experience of a group" (542) because it focuses on how actual language use connects with "underlying ideas, values, and beliefs" (543). Building on the idea that genre offers insight into the complex interrelationship between language and community, this essay will suggest that genre study can provide a useful framework for analyzing writing prompts, enabling teachers in a variety of disciplines to become aware of implicit assumptions in the writing tasks they assign.

My essay will argue that a genre approach to writing assignments can foster teacher awareness of unexpressed expectations in the writing they assign and that such awareness can help students complete writing tasks more successfully. Although writing assignments and the essays they produce cannot be viewed as homogenous, a "one-size-fits-all" form of writing, and although it is generally recognized that writing occurs in a disciplinary context, college writing assignments across the disciplines often contain assumed genre requirements which students may be unable to discern simply by reading the prompt. In classes focusing on interpretive, analytic, or argumentative writing, for example, such assumptions can include the necessity of constructing a rhetorically effective argument, thesis, or position which incorporates a suitable writer's stance, acknowledges opposing views, addresses audience appropriately, distinguishes between "old" and "new" information, and properly incorporates material from published works. These conceptual and rhetorical elements constitute implicit requirements of many college writing assignments, and a genre approach can thus be useful in helping students respond to those assignments.

Writing Assignments as a Performance-Oriented Text Genre

To examine the generic characteristics of a writing assignment—that is, to view it as a site "of social and ideological action" (Schryer 208), I will begin by comparing it to another genre. Consider, then, the following text:

> The living-room of a two-room tenancy occupied by the Boyle family in a tenement house in Dublin. Left, a door leading to another part of the house; left of door a window looking into the street; at back a dresser; farther to right at back, a window looking into the back of the house.

This description proceeds for half a page of present tense fragments. Then halfway into the paragraph, you come upon the following:

> Mary with her jumper off—it is lying on the back of a chair—is arranging her hair before a tiny mirror perched on the table.... She is a well-made and good-looking girl of twenty-two. Two forces are working in her mind—one, through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other, through the influence of books she has read, pushing her forward. The opposing forces areapparent in her speech and her manners, both of which are degraded by her environment.... (O'Casey 5)

If you were an actor, a student of literature, or simply a person familiar with drama, you would recognize this text immediately as adhering to the genre of stage directions, (especially if you noted that the words "ACT I" appeared at the top of the page). Your familiarity with this genre would enable you to understand the primary purpose of the text — to help an actor construct a character in accordance with or perhaps in resistance to the playwright's intentions. Genre familiarity would silence any concerns you might have about the missing verbs in the first two sentences, the sentence fragments, or the lack of transition between the description of the room, the description of the chair, and the brief sketch of Mary's conflicted values. Aware of the purpose and context of this genre, you would be able to respond to the text appropriately.

Writing assignments, like stage directions, can be viewed as a performance oriented text genre, the purpose of which is to generate particular understanding and action that will ultimately lead to a subsequent genre-the college essay. From this perspective, writing assignments are similar to stage directions in a number of ways: they contain

seemingly explicit cues about format, language, and style that the performer or student is presumed to understand, but which can be understood only by those who are already familiar with the genre—that is, the dramatic performance or the student essay. Moreover, both stage directions and writing assignments are based on implicit assumptions about what constitutes an acceptable "performance" and what is necessary to do in order to create that performance, assumptions that only those already familiar with the genre will understand. In the context of drama, these assumptions or presumed knowledge include the requirement for the actor to construct an appropriate role or dramatic "self" suitable for the particular kind of play—comedy, tragedy, or drama, project how that "self" will impact his or her audience, construct or at least consider that audience, and adhere to suitable drama conventions.

In terms of the college writing assignment, the underlying assumptions are similar—that is, to write an effective essay, the student needs to assume an appropriate textual self suitable for the writing task, project how that self will impact an intended audience, consider or perhaps fictionalize that audience, and adhere to suitable conventions of subject, approach, organization and style. The writing assignment, then, like stage directions, can be considered a genre because it is a "site of social action" (Devitt et. al. 543). Moreover, it is a genre that seems more transparent than it actually is. Although students have encountered a number of writing assignments in high school, the college writing assignment contains unstated assumptions unfamiliar to students, particularly novice students who must, as Bartholomae terms it, "invent" the university. As Lee Carroll notes in her longitudinal study of college writing, college writing assignments "might more accurately be called 'literacy tasks' because they require much more than the ability to construct correct sentences or compose neatly organized paragraphs with topic sentences" (3). In fact, for a number of students, the high school writing assignments with which they are most familiar —personal narratives or information-based reports—may actually mislead them about what they are supposed to do when they are assigned an essay in college classes. As Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff point out:

> some genres...are created within one professional community to be used by non-members of that community. While their purposes seem to be inclusive, to give nonmembers access to the community's knowledge, genre analysis strongly suggests that the specialist and nonspecialist users have different beliefs, interest, and purposes as well as levels of knowledge. (543)

Examples cited in their article include jury instructions, created by lawyers for jurors without legal training, tax forms, created by the IRS but meant to be used by people who are not experts in tax law, and ballots, which are created by politicians and lawyers but intended for average citizens. Writing assignments are in a similar category; they are created by specialists for the purpose of generating an appropriate response from novices.

Genre and Uptake

When I refer to writing assignments as a genre, I am using the term in the context of contemporary rhetorical genre theory, which focuses not only on the form and textual conventions of a text, elements which students often view as primary concerns, but, more importantly, on the rhetorical purpose of that text and every component of the text that contributes to the fulfillment of that purpose. This perspective views genre as a typified social action that responds to a recurring situation, that is, "that people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and that these ways of acting become typified through occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances" (Devitt 2000, 698). Carolyn Miller's seminal article titled "Genre as Social Action" (1984) redefined genre by building on earlier work in twentieth century rhetorical theory and then referring to Lloyd Bitzer's definition of the rhetorical situation as a "complex of persons, events, objects, and relations" presenting an "exigence" or necessity (Bitzer, 1968, cited in Miller, 1984, 152) which the rhetorical act addresses. In this context, generic conventions are understood as originating from suitability and appropriateness, rather than from arbitrary formal conventions, and both writing assignments and the essays they generate can be considered genres according to this definition. These aspects of genre are more subtle and abstract than formal elements —hence, more difficult for students to understand.

A writing assignment can also be viewed in the context of "uptake," a term used by Freadman derived from Austin's work in speech act theory. Although Austin's work focuses on the interpretation listeners make from a speaker's utterance, Freadman applies the concept to texts which can occur in a pair. "'Uptake," according to Freadman, is what happens when you accept an invitation to a conference, or agree to rewrite a paper for publication (and erase the traces of its previous occasionality for that purpose) or disagree with, or explore, a proposition in theory" (39). Freadman maintains that the concept of genre "is more usefully applied to the interaction of minimally, a pair of texts than to the properties of a single text" and she uses the term to "name the bi-directional relation that holds between this pair; that is between a text and its 'interpretant'" (Peirce 1932-58 , cited in Freadman 40). Noting that certain texts are contrived to generate certain kinds of "uptakes," Freadman maintains that "the interpretant , or the uptake

text, confirms its generic status by conforming itself to this contrivance" and that it does so by "'taking it as an' invitation or a request" (40). The writing assignment and the student essay it generates fulfill Freadman's definition of a "pair of texts." What is often the case, however, and is particularly common in the context of writing assignments, is that the person, in this case, the student, only partially understands the genre of the primary text and is, therefore, unable to construct an acceptable response.

The Social Goals of Writing Assignments

Critical terms in genre analysis are "situation," "social motive," or "rhetorical purpose" and using these terms, one might ask what are the "situation," "motive," or "rhetorical purpose" of writing assignments as they are constituted in first year writing courses and other college courses that involve writing. Presumably, writing assignments reflect the concept of university education at a particular historical moment, and therefore are influenced by how education is viewed within a political/social context. Certainly, the assignments that appear in our courses today are quite different from those in different periods in our history and have different underlying requirements for the uptake text they are intended to generate. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, the writing program at Harvard College assigned students to write about fairly general topics that involved little outside research, because writing assignments, or themes, as they were called, were regarded as exercises, the goal of which was "to bring all this heterogeneous class of young men, by constant training from October till June, to the point where they can write English of which they need not be ashamed" (Copeland and Rideout 2). To achieve this modest goal, the criteria for all assignments was correctness, a fairly explicit goal, and one which some students still consider primary. A book entitled Freshman English and Theme Correcting at Harvard College published in 1901 discusses the characteristics of the daily themes that students wrote and notes that the instructors who evaluated these themes were not looking for imaginative descriptions or subtle insights, but simply for correctness. The book states that the goal of instruction

> ...is not to make the daily themes interesting but to make them correct. If a student succeeds in making himself interesting, so much the better, but first they must seek correctness, and live in hope that the other things may be added unto them. (8)

What was the social motive of these themes? According to Copeland and Rideout, the underlying goal of these assignments was to enable the "illiterate and inarticulate, who cannot distinguish a sentence from a phrase, or spell the simplest words" (2) to become members of the educated classes, education being defined, presumably, as the ability to write correct prose of which one not be ashamed. Various tools were developed to help young men achieve this goal—handbooks, exercises, or theme cards (see Connors). Writing assignments, then, designed to effect correct writing, constituted a means of enabling young men to become members of a particular club, and although we might question the elitism of the club and its emphasis on "correctness," we would have to acknowledge that achieving "correctness" was an explicitly stated goal.

Today, however, although correctness is still considered important and although the club still exists, the situation and motive of writing assignments are more complex, far less explicit—in some ways, ironically, more elitist, despite the admission of a wide diversity of students into our colleges and universities. Although correctness continues to be valued, the most recent WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition (2000) emphasizes the acquisition of "rhetorical knowledge," defined as the ability to "focus on a purpose, respond to the needs of different audiences, respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations." Other goals in that statement focus on "critical thinking, reading and writing," defined in terms of "finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources." Presumably, these goals are based on a deeper view of what constitutes education, and a realization that becoming educated means becoming a part of an information-laden world where the notion of truth is problematized, and where texts are created by "pulling together bits and pieces of language to accomplish social and cultural goals" (Carroll 3) and require critical scrutiny and evaluation. Successful students must learn to think across disciplines and domains of knowledge; correctness is nice, but it isn't enough.

Many of our writing assignments reflect these underlying assumptions, particularly those that privilege academic discourse or academic argument in its various manifestations in the Humanities and Social Sciences. As defined by Peter Elbow, who, ironically, is usually associated with personal, expressive writing, this sort of essay is characterized by

> giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences: being clear about claims and assertions rather than just employing or insinuating; getting thinking to stand on its own two feet rather than leaning on the authority of who advances it or the fit with who hears it. In describing

academic discourse in this general way, surely I am describing a major goal of literacy, broadly defined. Are we not engaged in schools and colleges in trying to teach students to produce reasons and evidence which hold up on their own rather than just in terms of the tastes or prejudices of readers or how attractively they are packaged? (1991 140)

Yet for many students, new to the university community, and accustomed in high school to writing personal narratives or information-based reports, these goals remain hidden, and students read their writing assignments without understanding the kind of performance they are expected to enact. Often they are unaware that the writing assigned in many of their courses requires them to address a problem, to provide reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, or experiences, to be clear about claims and assertions rather than relying on unquestioned authority, and to assume a measured qualified tone that acknowledges the situatedness and complexity of problematic issues.

Students glance at their writing assignments without identifying that they are being asked to play a particular disciplinary role because they do not recognize that assignment as a performance oriented genre; nor do they understand how genres function in a disciplinary context. Genres ascribe to those involved distinct personae and social roles, depending on the recurring situation, but students who are novices to the discipline in which they are being asked to write are often unaware of what constitutes an appropriate persona. Many have little understanding of the "situation" the writing assignment intends them to address and are unfamiliar with the community (or audience) toward which their essay should be addressed. As Freedman and Medway explain,

> Communities differ in the expectations they have of arguments expressed by their members and in the kind of argument they are prepared to recognize as persuasive and appropriate. We all know, for example, that in our everyday experience, a very small sample is enough to convince us. One spoiled jar of Brand X mayonnaise deters us (and likely our friends) from buying Brand X. A sociology paper, in contrast, is successful within its community only when it shows that the sample selected can be shown to be representative by complex statistical maneuvers. The grounds or the kinds of evidence required are very different in the two cases. (7)

The Exclusivity of Genre

In fact, according to Shirley Brice Heath, the difficulty students have in understanding the generic requirements of writing assignments and in producing an appropriate uptake genre, may actually have been an intentional element of school-based writing. Castigating what she refers to as the "school essay" for its exclusion of "many of our current students from the educational process" (106), Heath points out that originally "English Composition emerged as a gatekeeping mechanism for immigrants and the increasing portion of working-class students attempting to make their way into secondary and higher education at the end of the 19 th century.... The school essay stood as the external evidence of one's capacity to organize thought, to be logical, and to think in an orderly and predicable fashion" (116).

The recent article by Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff acknowledges the exclusiveness of many genres, noting that because specialists and non-specialists have different beliefs, purposes, and backgrounds, genres tend to draw "the boundaries around professional communities even more tightly" (543). In her discussion of jury instructions, Devitt discusses the problem of technical language in specialized communities and the difficulty of providing adequate definitions of unfamiliar terms. Jury instructions, for example, frequently refer to two key terms, "aggravating" as opposed to "mitigating" circumstances, distinctions that jurors frequently are unable to discern. Yet, when Devitt attempted to define these terms explicitly for a non-specialist audience (the jurors), she encountered considerable difficulty because of the many hidden assumptions underlying the terminology. "[T]he complexity of the law, the technical nature of its precedents, and, in short, the embeddedness of the genre in its community makes it impossible for nonspecialists to understand fully as a specialist would, no matter how well-written, detailed, or rhetorically sophisticated the jury instructions" (548), Devitt maintains. Writing assignments, like jury instructions, involve understanding of implicit assumptions with which many students are similarly unfamiliar.

In the context of jury instructions, the terms "aggravating" and "mitigating" are recognized as specialized terms that require definition. But when instructors draft writing assignments, many of them are not aware that they are using specialized language, because the terminology seems deceptively straightforward and familiar. Terms such as "discuss," "address," "analyze," or "compare and contrast," which are commonly used in writing prompts or in essay questions, appear to be self-explanatory, seemingly easy to interpret, at least for the instructor who is writing the assignment. Students, however, misinterpret these terms frequently, because they do not understand their

connection to the generic purpose of writing assignments and have little experience with the uptake genre they are expected to produce. Moreover, the problem is confounded when the instructors, themselves, do not realize what they expect in a student essay—that is, until they receive an essay that does not fulfill those expectations (I have often referred to this phenomenon as the "assign and complain" method of teaching writing). An assignment in a Sociology or Political Science class may ask students to "discuss" or "address" a problem, and the student will dutifully provide a great deal of information about that problem.

However, what the instructor usually wants is a thesis driven paper or argument that addresses that problem in a rhetorical context, a paper that weighs opposing viewpoints and constructs a thoughtful position, perhaps a solution. An assignment in a Literature class may ask students to analyze a short story, but the student, unaware that an analysis is actually an interpretation presented as an argument, will simply summarize the plot or describe the main characters. The assignment, like stage directions, requires the student to assume a particular role in addressing the problem or interpreting the story, a role in which the exigence delineated in theassignment has become the student's own. However, a number of students may not understand that they are expected to play a role; nor do they realize that a performance of any kind is expected. They respond to the assignment as disciplinary outsiders, directly and innocently acknowledging the prompt in their essay, sometimes addressing remarks directly to the teacher, so that the resulting text becomes a kind of response letter, not the expected uptake essay.

The Generic Necessity of Role Playing

A successful response to a writing assignment, as Anis Bawarshi notes in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* , requires students to "situate and 'invent' themselves...before they can assume the position of student writer" (130), noting that writing prompts exercise a "socializing function" (129). Bawarshi discusses several examples of how students play various roles in their responses to writing assignments, some appropriate and some less so. In an extension of that notion, I maintain that, at least in some instances, the genre of the writing prompt requires the student to assume the role of thoughtful novice scholar who is genuinely concerned with the topic in the writing prompt, and that the resulting essay must give the impression that it was generated from the student's own concerns, not because the student was responding to a prompt (and really had no choice about doing so if he or she wanted to pass the course). Although writing assignments vary in their expectations of student roles, experienced writers understand that writing usually involves an element of role playing, whereas less experienced writers will intrude their everyday selves and/or directly address the prompt in the essay, thereby shattering the required illusion. For example, in a "Writing About Literature" course, students might be assigned to write an essay in which they agree or disagree with a particular critical perspective. Interpreting the prompt literally, some students who chose to disagree might begin their essays with a statement such as "I don't agree with Larry Rubin's interpretation that 'Where Are You Going , Where Have You Been?' is a dream," without setting a context for their disagreement or establishing their own connection to the topic. Similarly, students who chose to agree might write a statement such as "The story 'Where Are You Going , Where Have You Been?' is a symbolic dream. Larry Rubin agrees with me."

Some teachers might prefer this straightforward response in which students remain their everyday student selves. Others, however, might expect their students to "pretend" to be critics who have been grappling with various perspectives on a multifaceted story. These teachers might view the conversational "I don't agree," used without further elaboration or citation of evidence, as inappropriate to the genre of the critical interpretative essay.

Similarly, in the following prompt assigned in a first year writing class, students were asked to write an essay that examines the social or psychological "need" for a men's movement. The assignment prompt was written as follows;

> Some people maintain that not only women but men, too, have been the victims of gender role stereotypes. Men, they argue, are often unfairly depicted in the culture as morally inferior to women; moreover, options for men continue to be limited. Read the following essays (readings listed). Then in a 4-6 page essay, discuss the extent to which you feel the following statement is true: *Men, too, have been disadvantaged by sex role stereotyping.* Remember to define what you mean by "disadvantaged."

In writing an essay in response to this assignment, the knowledgeable student will be aware ofthe implicit requirement that he or she must assume the role of engaged social commentator, someone who has considered the effects of gender role stereotyping, has weighed alternatives, and has developed a thoughtful position on the topic. Such a student will understand that she must create her own exigence and pretend that it is the exigence and not the writing prompt that has generated her essay. A successful student, then, might introduce her essay as follows:

When I was in high school, I had the opportunity to participate in a number of girls athletic teams—baseball, basketball, even football. I didn't have to sit on the sidelines and be a cheerleader the way my mother did when she

was young. For my brother, though, the options were far more limited. In fact, they were pretty much the same for him as they had been for my father. If my brother wanted to be a cheerleader or join a sewing club, he would not have been allowed to do so. For him, his only choice was to participate in team sports. This limitation is due to gender role stereotyping which seriously disadvantages men throughout their lives.

This student understood that she must "pretend" to be a person who has been observing the effects of gender role stereotyping and feels compelled to write about their disadvantages for men. To introduce the topic, she begins with a localized anecdote which she can then expand to more general observations, supported by statements from the assigned readings. Although she has appropriated some of the wording in the assignment prompt, she does not quote it word for word, nor does she address it explicitly. She has played the expected role, and the performance has been executed without shattering the illusion.

In contrast, a student who does not understand the implicit requirements of a writing assignment—that is, the necessity of assuming a role, might write an introduction such as the following:

> Some people think that not only women but men, too, have been the victims of gender role stereotypes. *As we discussed in class*, these people think that men have been unfairly depicted in the culture as morally inferior to women and that their options continue to be limited. *I agree with this idea because I think* that gender role stereotyping disadvantages men too.

In this example, the student has slipped out of her role of cultural observer. Her reference to the class discussion (in italics) and her word for word quotation from the prompt calls attention to the classroom scenario and indicates that the student is writing in response to an assignment, not because she really cares about the topic. The phrase, "I agree with this idea" shatters genre expectations not because she uses the first person, but because the "I" is so obviously the student who is responding to an assignment, and because it establishes that the exigence is in the assignment, not appropriated and recontextualized by the student.

Writing Assignments and Audience

In comparing the first and second student responses to the assignment, one may be tempted to attribute the differences to the first student's insight into the concept of audience, and certainly an understanding of audience does contribute to the successful execution of a writing assignment. Writing teachers frequently ask students to "consider your audience," (see Glenn, Goldthwaite and Connors; and Williams) and sometimes they construct a fictitious audience—the principle of a school, the director of a corporation, or the President of the United States, to enable students to envision audience more clearly.

When teachers specify an audience as a particular person, however, they reinforce students'tendency to think of audience only in terms of an actual reader. However, an underlying assumption in the genre of the writing assignment across the curriculum, is for students to construct discourse for a wider audience and to develop an appropriate uptake text that fulfills the generic expectations of that audience. Such an audience is most easily defined when students write within a specific discipline, as Jonathan Monroe notes in a recent article. Writing from the perspective of an administrator, Monroe maintains that [S]ince writing in higher education takes place within local disciplinary and institutional contexts, "responsibility for teaching writing belongs to faculty in particular fields" (3). What is not addressed in Monroe's article, however, is that most students arrive at the university without knowing what field they wish to enter and that faculty in a number of disciplines may have neither the training, the time, nor the inclination to teach writing. Therefore, a great deal of university writing instruction, particularly at the lower division level, is taught by full time faculty, graduate students, or part-time lecturers in English departments or Writing Programs, and the writing assigned is not necessarily oriented toward an audience within a particular discipline. Instead, students are asked to write for a "general audience, " a concept that many students find difficult to understand.

Even when an assignment is oriented toward a particular individual, the successful execution of the assignment requires students to generalize from that individual—that is, they must extend their vision beyond one high school principle to a larger group that the principal represents. Moreover, as Kirsch and Roen point out, a difficulty with this rhetorical model is that it erroneously characterizes a rhetorical interaction as moving in only one direction, from the writer to the audience or reader. Genre study, however, reveals that both writer and reader are transformed through genre, and that just as a number of assignments require the student to "pretend" to be a thoughtful cultural observer, they may also require them to pretend that they are writing for a more encompassing, general audience and to orient discourse toward that audience. Walter Ong's notion that the "writer's audience is always a fiction" is certainly worth considering, but the generic requirement of a writing assignment is for students to create the *right kind* of fiction and

construct themselves as a credible participant in the ensuing dialogue.

If students do not understand the necessity of this form of role playing, they will assume that the teacher is the audience, an assumption that immediately changes the discourse. Sometimes students may omit necessary explanations, definitions or support, because they know that the teacher is familiar with the topic and doesn't need them. They may also address the writing prompt directly, as in the following example:

> My paper is about how the traditional family will not be a workable social entity in the twenty-first century. When we discussed Stephanie Coontz's book in class, it showed that the idea of the ideal traditional family is only a myth. I agree with Coontz's position.

Like the student who wrote the second paragraph concerned with gender stereotyping, this student was unaware that the genre of the writing assignment required her to fictionalize both herself and her audience. It is as if the actor in the play were to read the stage directions aloud to the audience, allowing the audience to watch him don his costume and practice his lines. Without pretense, the illusion is shattered.

Genre Analysis and the Writing Assignment: The Role of the Teacher

Genre analysis can enable instructors to become aware of the hidden assumptions within awriting prompt, helping them understand that it does not consist of a simple, straightforward list of instructions. Rather, to borrow a metaphor from George Dillon, a writing assignment more resembles a musical score than a computer program—that is, it consists of marks cueing or prompting an enactment or realization by the reader, rather than a code requiring deciphering (ix). It will also focus their attention on how the form in which the assignment is written can maximize the appropriateness of the uptake.

To cite an example, consider the following assignment from a first year writing course:

> In the popular television show Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, what do the writers and producers wish to suggest about society? Do the different races of aliens have analogous groups in our contemporary society? What image does the show provide of law enforcement? Of racial tendencies? Of moral leadership? What ethical message does the show give its viewers?

This assignment prompt is likely to be confusing to students because it contains too many questions. Unaware that one of the generic requirements implicit in many college writing assignments is to construct a thoughtful position on a problematic issue, novice students are likely to answer all the questions without connecting them, resulting in a disjointed and undeveloped essay that lacks focus and unity. Some, aware that a writing assignment constitutes a type of "test," might even retell the plot of various episodes of the show, as a means of demonstrating knowledge, a phenomenon that is particularly characteristic of responses to assignments concerned with literature or film. In contrast, more knowledgeable students would be able to read through the poorly defined assignment—or at least be able to ask pertinent questions about its goals. These students would realize that it is really the first question that the essay must respond to, and that the subsequent questions were designed to prompt the development of content. As actors in the community play, they would be able to construct a suitable performance.

If teachers are aware that writing assignments constitute a genre that presumes understanding of implicit assumptions, they can attempt to make them explicit, helping students understand implied requirements. Consciousness raising is the primary goal of genre analysis in that it can generate practical suggestions and advice. For example, teachers might spend time defining terms such as "discuss," "analyze," "address," "argue" or "compare and contrast," showing students examples from actual texts of how those terms become actualized in a thesis or position. Other terms that might need additional explanation include "critique," "construct," "define," "evaluate," "identify," "review," or "trace." Teachers can also call attention to the use of technical language that may seem familiar but which has a specialized meaning within the genre. For example, an assignment that asks students to evaluate whether political correctness or a particular law or movement is "beneficial" to society requires students to define what they mean by beneficial, but students may not be aware of this requirement on their own.

To help students write an appropriate response to writing assignments, teachers can raise questions about the genre of essay they are expecting. Such questions might include the following:

- What purpose does this genre serve?

- What are the features of this genre?
- How do its particular generic features serve its purpose?
- For whom is this genre written?
- What role must the writer assume in writing this genre?
- Whose interests does this genre serve?

Questions such as these can help students understand genre in the context of discourse community, as a form of rhetorical etiquette aimed at achieving a particular purpose. It is also useful for teachers to compare the essay genre they are expecting with other genres with which students might be more familiar. Comparing an essay with an advertisement, for example, can help students become aware of implied requirements, such as the necessity of problematizing a topic, of establishing a context for analysis and interpretation, of formulating a thesis that unifies the text and makes it meaningful, and of supporting that topic with evidence and logic.

Another useful strategy is for teachers to discuss the importance of role-playing, both in terms of constructing a writing persona and of fictionalizing an audience. Approaching writing in the context of performance can help students become aware that any rhetorically based discourse written in a cultural context involves assuming a particular role which then determines other elements of the text, such as tone, form, and style. Finally, a genre approach to writing assignments will help teachers construct them more consciously, defining unstated requirements and presenting the expected text in terms of situation, purpose and motive. Like stage directions, a writing assignment constitutes an invitation, not a set of specific instructions. Helping students understand what is involved in responding to that invitation appropriately will enable them to participate in the performance more successfully.

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