Turning Reading into Writing

Now that you have practiced doing genre analysis, how can you use what you know about genre to make more effective writing choices? Chapter 3 explores this key question fully. Identifying a genre's patterns and analyzing what they mean does not give writers a ready-made syllabus or complaint letter. Just as readers bring their own knowledge and beliefs to their reading and can choose to resist the roles defined for them by genres, writers also do more than just copy these patterns. Unlike a script for a play, where actors have all their lines written and need to choose only how to perform those lines, a genre's pattern or "script" does not tell us, as writers, exactly what actions to take, what roles to perform, or what sentences and words to use. What it does give us is a *general* sense of the scene and situation and some general rhetorical patterns, and we can use this knowledge of the scene and people's rhetorical behaviors within it to make more effective and informed writing choices.

Box 2.1 *Guidelines for Analyzing Genres*

1. Collect Samples of the Genre

If you are studying a genre that is fairly public, such as wedding announcements, you can look at samples from various newspapers. You can also locate samples of a genre in textbooks and manuals about the genre, as we did with the complaint letters. If you are studying a less public genre, such as the Patient Medical History Form, you might have to visit several doctors' offices to collect samples. If you are unsure where to find samples, use our strategies for observing scenes in Chapter 1 (p. 25) to ask a user of that genre for assistance. Try to gather samples from more than one place (for example, wedding announcements from different newspapers or medical history forms from different doctors' offices) so that you get a more accurate picture of the complexity of the genre. The more samples of the genre you collect, the more easily you will be able to notice patterns within the genre.

2. Identify the Scene and Describe the Situation in Which the Genre Is Used

Following the guidelines in Box 1.2, Step 1 (p. 40), try to identify the larger scene in which the genre is used. Seek answers to questions about the genre's situation. Consider:

- **Setting:** Where does the genre appear? How and when is it transmitted and used? With what other genres does this genre interact?
- **Subject:** What topics, issues, ideas, questions, etc. does the genre address? When people use this genre, what is it that they are interacting about?
- **Participants:** Who uses the genre?
  Writers: Who writes the texts in this genre? Are multiple writers possible? What roles do they perform? What characteristics must writers of this genre possess? Under what circumstances do writers write the genre (e.g., in teams, on a computer, in a rush)?
  Readers: Who reads the texts in this genre? Is there more than one type of reader for this genre? What roles do they perform? What characteristics must readers of this genre possess? Under what circumstances do readers read the genre (e.g., at their leisure, on the run, in waiting rooms)?
- **Purposes:** Why do writers write this genre and why do readers read it? What purposes does the genre fulfill for the people who use it?

3. Identify and Describe Patterns in the Genre's Features

What recurrent features do the samples share? For example:

- What **content** is typically included? What excluded? How is the content treated? What sorts of examples are used? What counts as evidence (personal testimony, facts, etc.)?
- What **rhetorical appeals** are used? What appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos appear?
- How are texts in the genres **structured**? What are their parts, and how are they organized?
- In what **format** are texts of this genre presented? What layout or appearance is common? How long is a typical text in this genre?
- What types of **sentences** do texts in the genre typically use? How long are they? Are they simple or complex, passive or active? Are the sentences varied? Do they share a certain style?
- What **diction** (types of words) is most common? Is a type of jargon used? Is slang used? How would you describe the writer's voice?

4. Analyze What These Patterns Reveal about the Situation and Scene

What do these rhetorical patterns reveal about the genre, its situation, and the scene in which it is used? Why are these patterns significant? What can you learn about the actions being performed through the genre by observing its language patterns? What arguments can you make about these patterns? As you consider these questions, focus on the following:

- What do participants have to know or believe to understand or appreciate the genre?
- Who is invited into the genre, and who is excluded?
- What roles for writers and readers does it encourage or discourage?
- What values, beliefs, goals, and assumptions are revealed through the genre's patterns?
- How is the subject of the genre treated? What content is considered most important? What content (topics or details) is ignored?
- What actions does the genre help make possible? What actions does the genre make difficult?
- What attitude toward readers is implied in the genre? What attitude toward the world is implied in it?

Rather than staring at a blank page or screen and guessing about how to begin writing or what to write about, you can turn to your knowledge of genres. Writing becomes choosing, not guessing. By analyzing any given genre, for example, you can make choices regarding major rhetorical elements:

Your purpose as writer

Knowing what genres are available in a given scene and how and why they are used will help you decide which one can best accomplish your purpose in writing. On the other hand, if you are *assigned* a genre to write and are not sure about your purpose for writing it, studying the genre can show you the purposes other writers have pursued with that genre. In either case, purpose and genre are interrelated: Your purpose for writing affects your choice of genre and your choice of genre affects your purpose.

Your role as a writer

Your role as a writer has to do with the kind of persona you choose to present in order to be persuasive as a speaker or writer. For example, should you be aggressive, soft-spoken, excited, subdued, or confident? The persona you choose will have a great deal to do with how effectively you write within a specific scene, as we saw in the example of the complaint letter. The patterns of behavior and communication within a genre will help you choose the role within that scene that will be the most appropriate in fulfilling your purpose.

Your readers

Certain genres are geared toward certain readers (the syllabus is geared toward students, the resumé toward an employer). By analyzing the genre, you learn something about your readers even though they may not be physically present. What do readers *expect* from the genre? For instance, do they expect to be treated with respect? Do they expect you to assume authority? Do they expect to laugh or cry or both? Do they expect you to be detailed, technical, and complicated, or do they expect simple and direct communication? Knowing something about your readers as revealed through the genre will help you "see" your audience, much like we began to "see" the audience during our analysis of the complaint letter. Such knowledge will help you decide what genre most suits your purpose.

Your subject matter

Any given subject can be treated in different ways depending on the genre used. A writer who analyzes the genres first is in a better position to decide

which genre to write and then how to treat the subject matter. Using your knowledge of these genres, contemplate your subject matter: How should you introduce it? Should you treat it objectively or personally? Do you need to explain it in detail or is such explanation unnecessary? Should you present it logically or emotionally or sarcastically, etc.? Do you need to provide examples? Should you be descriptive, argumentative, or both? Should you present both sides of the subject? Do you need to quote experts on the subject or can you depend on your own authority? And so on. Knowledge of the genre will help you make some of these decisions about what and how to write.

Your format and organization

On a very obvious level, knowledge of a genre's patterns will help you decide how to format your writing. A resumé, for example, is formatted differently from a complaint letter. Knowing this, you begin to conceptualize the appearance of your text so that what may have begun as a blank page or screen suddenly has a shape. You can decide if you should present your content in the form of tables and charts, graphics, lists, prose, or poetry. The structural features of a genre will help you decide not only how to format the physical appearance of your writing; they will also help you decide how to present and organize your ideas. For example, by learning the patterns of a genre, you can decide what to mention first, second, third, and so on. You can learn whether the main ideas are stated at the beginning or at the end, whether to move from generalities to particularities or from particularities to generalities. You can also decide what kinds of transitions, if any, to use between different sections of the text. In short, not only will your genre knowledge help you approach your subject matter, but it will also help you present your subject matter in certain ways.

Your sentences and word choices

Having read samples of your genre should have given you a sense of the typical style used in that situation, a feel for what texts in that genre sound like. You can imitate that style, trying to make your text sound like the ones you studied. As you revise your draft and take a more explicit and conscious approach, knowing something about the genre's sentence and diction patterns will help you decide, for instance, whether to use active or passive sentences. It will also help you decide how long your sentences should be and what kind of complexity and variation is expected. In the resumé, for example, sentences often begin with a verb rather than a subject and need to be

consistent ("Managed the sales department," "Served as liaison between employer and employees"). In other genres, of course, different sentence styles are preferred. The same applies to word choices. In scientific research articles, for example, the people being studied are often referred to as "subjects" while the pronoun "you" appears frequently in business letters. By looking at the patterns in word choice within a genre, you will be able to make more effective decisions about what words to use and why.

What we have just presented is meant only as a set of guidelines for using your knowledge of a genre to make more effective writing choices within that genre. There is no exact formula. The more you practice genre analysis, the more skillful you will become at reading genre scenes and situations. The better you are able to read and understand the patterns of a genre, the better you will become at knowing what purpose these patterns serve and how to make use of them in your writing. The next chapter will expand on this initial list and help you develop strategies for turning your reading of a genre into your writing of a genre.

Writing Activity 2.9

Review the genre you analyzed collaboratively in the last sets of activities or the genre of your choice in Writing Activity 2.8 (p. 91), including the samples you collected, your notes, and your conclusions. Based on your analysis, describe what a writer needs to understand about the scene and situation in order to write that genre. Use our suggested guidelines in Box 2.1 (pp. 93–94) and be as specific as you can. As a writer of this genre, what choices would you make regarding your role as writer, your readers, your subject matter, your format and structure, and your sentences and word choices? Record your responses and be prepared to share them with your teacher and classmates. Think of this activity as an exercise in prewriting, planning, and invention. You will be able to use this work as you proceed through the next chapter.