WHAT ARE GENRES?

According to John Swales, the use of genres is one of the six defining characteristics of a discourse community. But what are genres, anyway? In the past, you might have heard the word "genre" used in casual conversation to describe different types of books, music, or movies. Comedy, horror, and drama are film genres, just like jazz, rap, and vaporwave are genres of music. People who study how writing works in discourse communities use the word "genre" to refer to a concept that extends beyond movies and music, however.

Genres are "habitual responses to recurring socially bounded situations," meaning that they are ways people react or expect others to react to common social scenarios. Carolyn Miller popularized this view of genre in the 1984 article "Genre as Social Action" by arguing that the definition of a genre needs to be based in "the action it is used to accomplish" (151). From this perspective, a horror movie could be defined as a movie that scares, disturbs, or frightens an audience: scaring people (in a fun way) is the *action* that the horror movie *genre* is meant to perform. Texts of the same genre might share some characteristics—for instance, horror movies frequently include suspenseful music and tell stories focused on subjects like the supernatural— but it's the action of scaring that makes up the core of the horror movie genre.

As common responses to social situations defined by the actions they enable, genres are always used to accomplish something. This applies to more than just movies! A resume is a genre you use to find a job. A thank you card is a genre you use to show gratitude for gifts or favors. A menu is a genre that restaurants use to explain what dishes they serve. Other kinds of texts could probably fulfill the same actions, but the resume, thank you card, and menu genres are what audiences expect and what most writers automatically reach for when they encounter these rhetorical situations.

 To understand how a genre like the resume becomes the "automatic response" to a situation, we can think about genres developing like desire paths. A desire path is a physical path that forms when people move through an area using the same route (Fig. 1). These paths often represent the most direct route to where people are going, making them convenient and desirable. Over time, more and more people might begin to take the desire path, rather than less direct paved routes, because it seems like a socially-accepted option. At some point, the path might become so heavily trafficked that a local government even decides to pave it over and make it part of the institution's official infrastructure.

Fig. 1. A desire path branching away from a paved walkway.

Like desire paths, genres develop through repeated use. People first begin to create texts that help them accomplish a specific action. If many similar texts are created for the same purpose, people might start to recognize them as a genre and expect others to begin using that genre, as well. As Hart-Davidson explains, "the structural characteristics of genres emerge from these repeated instances of action and are reinforced by institutional power structures" (39). The genre therefore becomes the most apparent and trusted option for acting in a specific social scenario. It's important to note that genres aren't set in stone, however. Because genres take shape as more people begin to use and recognize them, the conventions of a genre are subject to change. (Conventions are the stated or unstated "rules" for the text's structure, content, and design). This means that, over time, the surface-level features of a genre may shift along with the beliefs, values, and practical needs of the communities using it.

In summary, genres are more than categories for sorting texts. They are socially recognized methods for action within groups, and they are also one important characteristic of discourse communities, as defined by Swales. The features or conventions of a genre are typically connected to what the genre is used to accomplish, but genres can also change over time.

WHAT COUNTS AS A GENRE?

An individual text is not itself a genre; instead, individual texts are examples of their genres. When you look at multiple texts belonging to the same genre, you can begin to make observations about the genre overall. For example, you can determine which features are required for the text to be recognized as part of the genre, as well as which features are optional. You can then use what you've learned to begin writing texts in the genre yourself. To learn more

about analyzing unfamiliar genres, check out ["Make Your "Move": Writing in Genres"](#) by Brad Jacobson, Madelyn Pawlowski, and Christine M. Tardy.

When trying to determine whether something is a genre, you should remember that genres don't always have to be traditional print texts. Genres can make use of many modes of communication. The important thing is that a genre is a common form of social action recognized by the people who use it.

The concept of genre becomes a lot clearer when you identify examples from familiar communities. Think about the syllabus as an example of a genre used in a classroom, for instance. A syllabus is a type of document used for communicating course expectations to students, which is the social action facilitated by the genre. The syllabus also has typical features and conventions that individual examples of the genre tend to share, such as precise explanation of course policies and assignments, the inclusion of identifying information about the course (instructor name, classroom number, etc.), and the use of subheadings to organize content. Other genres commonly used in classroom discourse communities include:

- Lectures
- Essays
- Tests and quizzes
- Assignment descriptions
- Instructor feedback

Collections of genres that work together to accomplish a community's overarching goals are sometimes called genre sets. There are many more genres that we could add to the classroom genre set above. Can you think of any specific to your educational experience?

You should also note that not all genres are as formal as those found in workplaces or college classrooms. Chances are, you use many different genres in your day-to-day life. Here are some examples of genres being used in everyday situations:

- A student writes a short article for the "Opinion" section of the school newspaper (Genre: Op-Ed)
- A man makes a speech at his sibling's wedding reception to celebrate the newly-married couple (Genre: Toast or Best Man Speech)
- A foodie posts a five-star review of a new restaurant online (Genre: Yelp Review)
- A social media user puts together a short video using the audio from the latest trend (Genre: TikTok Trend Video)
- A home cook writes down instructions and gives them to a friend (Genre: Recipe)