Genre Theory

Teaching, Writing, and Being

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I Theory

One never writes or speaks in a void.
Amy Devitt, Writing Genres
I would add:
- Metalinguistic
- Transfer
- Categorization
- Science of "genres" and cognitive development

Reflective structures of understanding

\[ \Rightarrow \] How people learn
- Chunks

Genre awareness
- Authorship
- Gives us a way of understanding how words work, create, and export

Use Plan

1. Process
2. Assemble flat good cut
3. Interim report
4. Versatile meta-historical
5. Critical literacy push
6. Multimodal
1 Why Study Genre Theory?

A friend asked me, "Why is genre theory worth exploring?" Good question. I think it's because genre theory can address many of the problems and challenges we encounter when we teach writing to secondary students. Genre theory is based on the idea that writing is social and that it responds to situations; consequently, writing isn't the same for every person or every situation. Genre theory is "messy" and "complex," to use Amy Devitt's words, and that makes it hard to define—but, for me, it provides answers that help me improve my instruction and student writing (Writing 219). Those answers make it worth the mess and complexity.

So what are the benefits of using genre theory in the classroom? To begin with, genre theory addresses some aspects of the writing process that get left out of many classrooms. The writing process approach is intended to help students imitate the procedures of more experienced writers and, thus, improve their writing products. Unfortunately, it doesn't always do that. Over twenty years ago, Arthur N. Applebee anticipated a potential problem when he observed that "in many excellent classrooms the various process activities have been divorced from the purposes they were meant to serve. In the original studies of individual writers, the multitude of specific techniques that writers used to aid their planning, revising, or editing were strategies or routines that they orchestrated to solve particular problems. The choice of appropriate strategies was driven by the task at hand—not by a generalized concept of the 'writing process' that the writers used in all contexts" (102). Sometimes those parts of the process originally attached to specific situations and purposes are taught or perceived as routine steps performed for all writing situations.

In contrast to this "generalized" process we sometimes see implemented in classrooms, Mary Jo Reiff describes her process as she wrote her pedagogical response to the preceding theory chapters of the edited collection Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers. Among other things, she compared the genre she was asked to write to ones she knew and then found similarities; she asked questions about her role and the actions her chapter was intended to perform; she "looked for clues about how the assignment located [her] within a situa-
tion and provided [her] with the rhetorical means for acting within that situation”; and she located herself in the larger context of the culture (“Moving” 157). In essence, she modeled procedures successful writers follow whenever they are asked or need to act through writing: they adapt the writing process for the specific purposes at hand—and these include consideration of the social aspects of writing. Genre theory fattens the idea of the writing process, fills it out from its sometimes lean appearance in secondary classes. A more complete idea of process—including the introduction of social considerations—can lead to student success with writing.

An understanding of genre theory is particularly helpful to writers during invention and revision because knowing about genres helps us position ourselves and consider readers’ expectations. When I want to write a letter to my friend, I know immediately that I won’t have to explain everything I say or even use complete sentences. I won’t worry about revision—I probably won’t even reread what I write. In contrast, when I wrote a letter of complaint to a large company, I thought for a long time about my position as a customer and the number of people who might read my letter before it got into the hands of someone who could provide the satisfaction I wanted. I selected appropriate details from my experience, and I was conscious of the tone I was using since I wanted to be taken seriously. I had several people read drafts of the letter and give me suggestions for revision before I finally mailed it. Knowing the genre of complaint letters helped me know where to start my writing and which considerations to think about when I revised. Knowing genres gives all writers a “metarhetorical awareness” (Horning 261) that allows them to make effective choices all through the writing process.

The fuller understanding of writing processes that comes from genre theory also leads to a better solution for the product/process dichotomy evident in some classrooms. When it is clearly connected to the situation, students don’t see process as a series of products teachers ask them to complete in addition to the paper they were originally assigned. They don’t see the freewrite or revision as an extra—and they shouldn’t be inclined to scribble on a copy of the final draft just to make it look as though it had been revised. When each product is obviously a part of the process, the challenges of getting students to work through that process diminish. The connections between what writers do to create texts and the success of those texts in accomplishing their purposes in specific situations show the value of the choices made during the writing process. Genre theory links process and product in key ways.
Genre theory also challenges students’ assumptions that good writing is always the same, that situation, purpose, audience, and relationships don’t have an impact on successful writing. Sometimes students think either that teachers are keeping the secret of good writing to themselves or that some teachers (the ones that give them high grades for writing) are the only ones who recognize good writing. Genre theory encourages “the idea that good writers adapt well from one genred site of action to the next” (Bawarshi, Genre 156; emphasis added). Good writing depends on context—and good writers are ones who know that. Charles Bazerman points out that thinking about genres—of the situations associated with them and the actions carried out by them—can help students “understand when seemingly well-written texts go wrong, when those texts don’t do what they need to do” (“Speech Acts” 311). When students think there is only one “right” way to write, genre theory can help them understand the need to adapt writing to situations and the problems that might result if they choose not to adapt.

Genre knowledge also makes important connections for students between reading and writing. Sunny Hyon says that genre “is the first element shaping readers’ interpretations of a text, guiding their expectations about the text’s topics and the author’s comment on that topic” (123). Thus, when young students see the cover of the book Diary of a Worm (Cronin), with its picture of a worm in a red ball cap and wielding a pencil as he sits on a bottle cap (if they know picture books at all), they position themselves accordingly: they suspend disbelief, expecting a worm to be personified, to tell of his days, and to show personality. They don’t expect a scientific book dense with facts about worms. In a reverse example, when my university students were assigned an article about genre theory, they had a lot of difficulty with it initially. They didn’t know how to position themselves as readers since they didn’t know the conversation the article was a part of. It was my job to orient them to the academic situation that the article responded to. Because genre connects reading and writing, J. L. Lemke claims that “genre is potentially the great unifying theme of the language arts curriculum... It enables us to teach students about the expectations of readers, and the strategies of writers” (4). In fact, Richard M. Coe asserts that genre “epitomizes” the important ways teachers can connect reading and writing in the classroom because both are social processes and participate in social actions (“Teaching” 159). Genre theory, then, can help students succeed as both readers and writers.

Testing is another classroom concern that genre theory can address. When teachers feel that pressure to succeed on high-stakes standardized
tests is encouraging a limited view of writing among their students, genre theory can bring back an appropriate perspective. If, as Carolyn R. Miller claims, “genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (“Genre” 165), then they are also keys to understanding testing situations and how they differ from other writing actions. Coe claims that “understanding genre will help students become versatile writers, able to adapt to the wide variety of types of writing tasks they are likely to encounter in their lives” (“New Rhetoric” 200). That adaptability means that they will be better able to separate the writing expectations of a standardized test from those of, for example, a college entrance essay. Since students sometimes get the impression that “passing the test” must mean that they are “good” writers, a genre approach is invaluable. It can help teachers clarify for students that the kind of writing valued on tests represents a limited perspective of what counts as effective writing.

The pressure of testing can also limit teachers’ view of writing instruction. Teachers can’t ignore students’ need to write for such situations, but David Russell provides an effective analogy to remind teachers that genre theory also addresses this test-preparation situation. He explains that some people may be skilled at ball handling in one game (table tennis, for instance) but awkward with the same-sized ball in another game (jacks, for instance). Russell concludes that “there is no autonomous, generalizable skill called ball using or ball handling that can be learned and then applied to all ball games” (57). When he asks, “How can one teach ball-using skills unless one also teaches students the games, because the skills have their motive and meaning only in terms of a particular game or games that use them?”(58), teachers should hear: How can we teach writing as a discrete skill without connecting it to the situation in which it resides? With a genre approach, we can teach students that the values of writing in one situation (testing) are unique to that situation and not necessarily valued in the same way in other writing situations or for other purposes: “One always evaluates the effectiveness of ball using within a particular game, not in general” (59). With that perspective from genre theory, teachers can prepare students to succeed on tests without abandoning good practice. Testing is just one “game” of writing.

Knowing about genres also contributes to critical literacy because it helps students say what they want to say within a situation and understand the implications of doing so. In her book Writing Genres, Devitt proposes that the consequences of resisting generic expectations might depend on “the status in the society of the individual who is breaking the convention. . . . Having established membership in a group, a writer then can violate expectations with less severe consequences, though even
then the consequences are unpredictable" (86). Once students understand the social aspects of genres, understand that genres carry expectations for acting in certain ways, they can begin to consider the implications of choosing to follow or to resist the expectations associated with those situations. When students resist generic expectations—when their use of informal language in a letter of apology to the principal suggests that they are peers instead of working within a relationship that has an unequal level of authority—there will be consequences. Genre theory helps explain that situation. However, Devitt also notes that "to conform to those expectations also entails consequences, good and bad" ("Genre" 46). Students who know that genres are more than forms, that they represent ways of being and acting in the world, are more capable of choosing resistance or compliance—and the resulting consequences—more effectively.

Currently, teachers are looking for more effective ways to address multimedia writing in their classes. Genre theory provides a sound foundation for such instruction, especially at a time when many teachers are treating different media simply as forms or technological gimmicks with no regard to situation, context, rhetorical strategies, or social action. Kevin Brooks makes a strong case for how genre-based pedagogy can be an important way to approach teaching multimedia projects, Web writing, and hypertexts. Because, he says, students know online genres, their familiarity should serve as "guideposts," "should be at the heart of a genre-based hypertext pedagogy" (342). He suggests "having students understand that all texts, including hypertexts, are rooted in one or more genres" (343). Students who understand genres and their connection to context and situation will be better able to adjust to the challenges of writing in multiple mediums. Also, since "a strong trend in hypertext production seems to be the blurring of genres or the creation of hybrid genres" (343–44), genre theory makes a good foundation for instruction in hypertexts.

These are just some of the reasons genre theory is worth exploring: the ways it enhances the writing process, especially in invention and revision; the ways it connects reading and writing, aiding both readers and writers; the ways it develops writers as critical thinkers and users of language; and the ways it presents fuller approaches to testing and multimodal writing. Nancy Myers states boldly that "without an understanding of genre, students do not succeed" (165). I agree wholeheartedly. So, even though genre theory is somewhat complicated, its benefits to writing and writing instruction—its ability to address many of the concerns and issues of secondary classrooms—make it a valuable addition to pedagogy.
Explaining Genre Theory

The uses of genre theory that help it address instructional challenges underscore the new way genre is being defined. More than classifying a "kind" of writing—poetry, a novel, or a letter, for instance—at its heart, genre theory emphasizes the idea that writing is socially constructed. Carolyn R. Miller's landmark 1984 article "Genre as Social Action" is credited with extending the traditional definition of genre in ways that opened new avenues of thought. She argues that genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159). Her emphasis is on the "action [a genre] is used to accomplish" (151) rather than the form a genre takes or even the situation in which it arises.

But that was just the beginning; her idea led to new ways of considering genres. A more thorough explanation is complicated, because, in the end, the theory isn't unified. It's genre theories—plural—and they begin with trying to define genres.

DEFINING GENRES

"Genres pervade lives. People use them, consciously and unconsciously, creatively and formulaically, for social functions and individual purposes, with critical awareness and blind immersion, in the past and yet today. They shape our experiences, and our experiences shape them. As we study and teach these ways of acting symbolically with others, we may be approaching an understanding not just of genres but of the messy, complex ways that human beings get along in their worlds" (Devitt, Writing 219).

Perhaps messy and complex are two perfect words to begin to define genres as current theories conceive of them. Defining genre has become very difficult, partly because, as Paul W. Richardson notes, "a perfectly useful word has now been so expanded in meaning as to render it imprecise" (124–25). Anis Bawarshi shows that, even in looking at the etymology, the word is challenging. He notes that genre comes from Latin cognates through French, "suggest[ing] that genres sort and generate" (Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff 550). In other words, genres can both arrange what exists and produce something else, something that might not have existed before. The origin of the word reveals a hint of genres' complexity, showing that they are capable of multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory, actions.
To explain genres, then, it might be simpler to start with what they are not. Many educators still consider genres as “(a) primarily literary, (b) entirely defined by textual regularities in form and content, (c) fixed and immutable, and (d) classifiable into neat and mutually exclusive categories and sub-categories” (Freedman and Medway, “Introduction” 1). Instead, today, genres represent all sorts of interactions (some textual and some not), are defined more by situation than form, are both dynamic and flexible, and are more an explanation of social interaction than a classification system.

**Genres Are Not Only about Literary Texts Anymore.** In fact, Bazerman indicates that considering genres only from a literary perspective has reduced the recognition of their social aspect: “Because literature is often written and read in contemplative circumstances, apparently (but not thoroughly) removed from immediate exigencies of life, the social embeddedness of genre has been less visible” (“The Life” 20). Thus, although literature also responds to a social context, it is such an abstract one that we often fail to recognize it. Because genres today are more defined by their social situations, genres include all interactions involving texts. In fact, everyday texts, more than literary ones, are often a focus of current genre study.

**Genres Are More Than Forms.** Although, as Anthony Paré and Graham Smart acknowledge, “repeated patterns in the structure, rhetorical moves, and style of texts are the most readily observable aspects of genre” (147), these observable features do not, by themselves, constitute a genre. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway explain that regularities in form come from the situation, instead of existing without reason: “Genres have come to be seen as typical ways of engaging rhetorically with recurring situations. The similarities in textual form and substance are seen as deriving from the similarity in the social action undertaken” (“Introduction” 2). Bazerman extends the explanation, showing that forms not only come from situations but also guide us through situations: “Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life . . . Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar” (“Life” 19). And Marilyn L. Chapman affirms the others’ assertions about form’s relation to genre: “Rather than rules to be followed . . . or models to be imitated . . ., genres are now being thought of as cultural resources on which writers draw in the process of writing for particular purposes and in specific situations” (469). So, although form is an aspect of genre, form does not define a genre.
Genres Are Not Fixed. Because genres are responses to social situations (and situations are always changing), genres cannot be fixed. At the same time, as noted previously, they are not totally without regularity either. As Devitt explains, "genres, then, are not arbitrary or random, being tied to rhetorical and social purposes and contexts, but neither are they necessary and inevitable, being shaped by various influences at various times" ("Language Standard" 47). Genres are stable, but not unchanging. They may share characteristics over time or in different situations—in fact, a certain amount of stability is essential for genres to carry out action—but they are never exactly the same because no two situations are exactly the same.

Genres Are Not Sortable into Precise Categories nor Are They Classification Systems. Humans can’t help but see similarities between responses to situations—special occasions may warrant a greeting card, for instance. But selecting an appropriate greeting card depends partly on the situation—birthday, graduation, death, Mother’s Day—so they can’t be all the same genre. Even for the same occasion—Mother’s Day, for example—a variety of possible responses (cards) is available: sweet, sappy, sentimental, humorous, and so on, depending on the individuals’ relationship, and cards can be for birth mothers, adoptive mothers, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers. Because of this connection to situation, Devitt asserts that although classification is an “essential part of understanding genre . . . such classification is defined rhetorically, rather than critically, by the people who use it” (Writing 9). Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior agree: classification is more a matter of people attempting to locate and generate genres than of people assigning genres to categories (“Participating” 143). In this way, rhetorically and socially, genres have aspects that allow classification, but not in the traditional sense of being a label for a category by which texts can be identified.

So, if genres are not forms, not fixed, not only about literary texts, and not classification systems, what are they? Gunther Kress defines them by their process of development: “In any society there are regularly recurring situations in which a number of people interact to perform or carry out certain tasks. Where these are accompanied by language of whatever kind, the regularity of the situation will give rise to regularities in the texts which are produced in that situation” ("Genre as Social" 27). So they are texts developed in and responding to recurring situations. That’s at the center of genre theory. But theorists are continuing to enlarge the concept. As Bawarshi maintains, “we oversimplify genres when we define them only as the typified rhetorical ways in which individuals function within socially defined and a priori recurrent situations” ("Genre
Chapter 2: Explaining Genre Theory

Function” 356; emphasis added). Paré and Smart separate out the functions Bawarshi mentions and describe genre as having “a distinctive profile of regularities across four dimensions” (146). These dimensions include (1) the texts themselves, (2) the processes used to compose the texts, (3) the practices readers use to understand the texts, and (4) “the social roles” the texts and practices establish (146). This expansion of the idea of genre beyond text and into actions, processes, and relationships brings us back to genres as messy and complex. It is difficult to define genres precisely; from a synthesis of theorists’ perspectives, we can, however, characterize genres as

- social
- rhetorical
- dynamic
- historical
- cultural
- situated
- ideological

I will discuss each aspect of genre separately, but it will soon be clear that these aspects of genre are not discrete. They depend on each other and interrelate in complex ways.

Social

Genres are social. They are used to act in specific situations, and they arise from social interactions. Because of those characteristics, they both reflect the social interaction and help people make sense of shared social experiences. As Bawarshi points out, they “help us define and organize kinds of social actions” (“Genre Function” 335). We make our way in social situations, and figure them out, partly through the genres associated with those situations. Programs at the opera and memos at the office guide participants in different situations. At the same time, the social situation shapes the genre. In some offices, less formal email messages replace memos, while in others, the email message still reads and looks like a traditional memo. So, genres act in situations, but they are also products of that situation.

Genres also respond to social situations; they interact with them. In fact, Bazerman asserts that “each successful text creates for its readers a social fact,” becoming “part of the way that humans give shape to social activity” (“Speech Acts,” 311, 317). Because of these shaping aspects, genres act as a kind of etiquette, according to Anne Freadman, showing
“how people get on with one another” (“Anyone” in Freedman and Medway 57); they are “a social code of behavior established between the reader and author” according to Bawarshi (“Genre Function” 343). Freedman suggests we consider the “rules” of genres to be manners more than laws; by doing so, we can see how genres not only act for purposes but also create options for our actions, options we can choose to adopt or reject, with corresponding social consequences. If we choose to submit a poem when a résumé is expected, we might not get the position—that is, of course, unless the position is for a poet. So genres are social in how they function and in how they respond, in their effects and in their origins.

Because genres are social, part of the meaning they carry resides in the social context that creates the genre. As Bazerman and Prior assert, “only part of the meaning resides in the particular qualities of the texts, while much sits within the sociohistorical genesis of the social, institutional, and material systems within which the texts, users, and interactions are bound together” (“Participating” 137). For example, they list multiple purposes for filling out a form: to “make application, comply with a regulation, or report an event” (144). The texts (forms) may seem similar, but the meaning each carries differs depending on the social situation in which it occurs. And, as people use a genre in a particular activity, they begin to see it as part of that activity, as part of the social web of the community.

Genres are not only ways users act socially. They also have a social aspect in themselves: they interact with each other, both explicitly and implicitly, in noticeable forms and in less noticeable uses of language (Bazerman, “Intertextuality” 86–87). These interactions are referred to as intertextuality, and they occur in a number of ways. Some genres develop out of others, carrying elements of those previous genres into new situations; some respond to ideas and language in other genres, using that language or those ideas as support or as the basis for argument. One specific type of intertextuality, called “genre chains” by Christine M. Tardy and John M. Swales (570), describes genres that always act in response to prior genres. An assignment prompt from a teacher followed by the students’ completed assignment followed by the teacher’s comments and grade on the assignment—that would be a genre chain.

As a result of this (or interwoven with this) social-activity building aspect, genres position participants, creating social roles for them. David Quammen addresses this role assignment when he writes about compiling his magazine columns for a book: “I mention that sense of relationship because a column is, in my opinion, different from other sorts
Chapter 2: Explaining Genre Theory

of magazine writing. Part of a columnist's special task is to turn oneself into an agreeable habit, yet to maintain an edge of surprise and challenge that prevents readers from letting the habit become somnolent rote.... The relationship between a magazine writer and the readers tends, in most circumstances, to be fleeting and shallow. In a book, on the other hand, a reader undertakes a sustained and serious connection with the writer. ... A column can be the most conversational form of journalism, but to create the sense of a conversation with readers, the writer must consent to be a person, not a pundit" (11-12). As Quammen demonstrates, different genres create different relationships. To make any relationship work, the participants agree to take on certain roles. As Paré and Smart explain, "these generic characteristics of role and relationship determine what can and cannot be done and said by particular individuals, as well as when, how, where, and to whom" (149). When I receive an email message from my supervisor, I take a different stance (word choice, level of formality in tone, etc.) in my response than I do when I reply to an email message from a student. Same genre—different roles. The assignment and acceptance of roles and the resulting relationships are part of the social aspect of genres.

Rhetorical

Because they both establish and enforce relationships, genres are rhetorical. That is, they allow users to choose among options to effectively accomplish their purposes in each particular situation. Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors identify the "choice of available resources to achieve an end" as part of what makes something rhetorical (2). Certainly, if genres are viewed as manners, choice is an element, as is adapting to situation: manners shift for different situations, and people can choose to observe expectations or not. Genre users, then, consider options for communicating their own purposes within the situation, choosing to follow generic expectations or not, to one degree or another.

Devitt posits the presence of both stability and flexibility in the nature of any genre: "stability to ensure that the genre continues to fulfill its necessary functions, flexibility to ensure that individuals can adapt the genre to their particular situations and their changing circumstances" (Writing 135). The flexibility she mentions and users' ability to adapt genres show their rhetorical aspects. Terence T. T. Pang describes these rhetorical choices as moves: "Moves are purposeful functional units sustaining the communicative intent of the speaker" (147). Genre users can choose among obligatory moves—those aspects of a genre that are es-
sential to others’ identification of it as a genre—and optional moves—those aspects of a genre that are more flexible. For example, in a movie review it would be obligatory to include the reviewer’s overall evaluation of the movie, examples to support that evaluation, and references to the acting, cinematography, or other aspects of the production. Optional moves might include choices regarding the arrangement of the review’s content (giving the evaluation first or last), the tone the reviewer takes (objective or satiric), or the overall purpose (to inform or persuade). Deciding to follow expected moves and selecting among optional ones are rhetorical choices. The element of strategic choice, of being able to consider situation, purpose, timing, audience, culture, and available options when using a genre, is what makes genres rhetorical.

Dynamic

Partly because they are both social and rhetorical, genres change, and they create change in their contexts. Jeanne Fahnestock provides an interesting example that shows how genres affect context. She lists three different approaches a dean can take to address faculty about budget cuts: listing the cuts in a this-is-how-it-will-be format; explaining the needs and, together with the faculty, brainstorming possibilities for addressing the cuts; or explaining the problem and arguing for a particular course of action (266). Although the initial situation is the same, Fahnestock argues that each rhetorical choice will create a different resulting situation; thus, the choice of genre can change the situation: “The ability of genre to shape context is, then, an important point” (266). This ability of genres to both respond to and affect situation is part of what makes them dynamic.

Another aspect of genres, their ability to be flexible, also contributes to their dynamic nature: because genres can adapt, they also change. Deborah Hicks notes that genres “do not fully determine the particular rhetorical moves that can occur in a given setting. Participants can, and do, interpret and subtly alter the discourses that might otherwise be constitutive of a social action” (467). Echoing this sentiment about genres’ flexibility, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin assert this interesting claim: “We feel that genericness is not an all-or-nothing proposition. . . . Instead, communicators engage in (and their texts reveal) various degrees of generic activity” (“Rethinking” 492). In other words, some examples of a genre might be more like the expectation than others. Because users adapt genres to their purposes and make rhetorical choices in varying social situations, genres have flexibility—and flexibility can lead, eventually, to change.
Researchers reviewing specific genres through time have documented this dynamic nature. For example, Devitt summarizes JoAnne Yates's review of American business genres from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an example—noting the factors influencing genre change as well as the ways genres influence cultural transformations (Writing 93–96, 102–6, 110–12). In her survey of several such studies, Devitt demonstrates that contextual factors as well as individuals working within genres (resisting them as well as adapting them) contribute to genre change. Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi assert that this dynamic aspect of genres is very much a factor of people's use of them: "Genres do not change magically on their own: people change genres, usually slowly and imperceptibly, as they begin to recognize the ways in which genres no longer fully serve their needs" (163). Such change can take place at different paces because of varying influences, but there is no doubt that people using genres to accomplish social and personal goals will have an effect on the genres they use.

**Historical**

Genres are historical in the sense that when they change—or when new genres develop—they depend on previous genres, antecedent genres, for their development. In explaining this characteristic in oral language, M. M. Bakhtin declared, "Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances" (69). Echoing Bakhtin, Margaret Himley asserts that "in learning to write (or speak), the learner ... learns the ways of making meaning of a particular language community by appropriating and reworking those ways to which she has access" (138). Because genres don't exist in a vacuum, because, as Devitt affirms, "our response to [a] situation can be guided by past responses," antecedent genres reveal the historical aspect of genres ("Generalizing" 576). In fact, Devitt argues that "when new genres develop abruptly they may derive more from the context of genres [i.e., previous related ones] than from the context of situation" (Writing 99).

Kathleen Jamieson's study of George Washington's first State of the Union address shows the incredible influence of prior genres in developing new ones:

The umbilical ties were stronger than the framers of the Constitution suspected. Faced with an unprecedented rhetorical situation, Washington responded to the Constitutional enjoinder that the president from time to time report to Congress on the state of the union and recommend necessary and expedient legislation, by
delivering a speech rooted in the monarch's speech from the throne. The Congress, which had rejected as too monarchical the title "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of the Rights of the Same," promptly reacted as Parliament traditionally reacted to the King, and drafted, debated, and delivered an "echoing speech" in reply. (411)

As Devitt concludes, when no genre exists for a new action, the "situation depends heavily on the first rhetor to choose antecedents wisely" (Writing 97). Certainly when the first choice isn't as appropriate as it could be, it will be changed—eventually. Until then, though, the consequences of the ineffective genre are at work in the situation. Because genres grow out of past genres and develop into new ones, because they may even depend more deeply on those past genres than we expect, they are historical.

Cultural

In a socially based theory of writing, context matters. Genres are cultural in the sense that they occur in and respond to what Devitt calls a "macro level of context"—a context broader than the immediate situation of the genre—or culture (Writing 31). Other theorists refer to this larger concept of context as discourse community, activity system, community, or simply context. All of these other terms have aspects unique to them but share the idea of broad context, which I generalize here with the label of culture. My generalization, however, isn't intended to simplify the concept of culture. Miller, noting that "Raymond Williams (1976) has called 'culture' one of the two or three 'most complicated' words in the English language," defines it this way: "culture as a 'particular way of life' of a time and place, in all its complexity, experienced by a group that understands itself as an identifiable group" ("Rhetorical" 68). Devitt adds specifics when she defines culture ("loosely") as "a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and templates" (Writing 25). So culture represents the broad context that influences genres—what genres are used, when and how, and by whom.

Despite these clarifications, the concept of culture—discourse community, context, whatever—is, as Berkenkotter and Huckin call it, "slippery" because it isn't a "static entity" ("Rethinking" 497). People move in and out of cultures and belong to several simultaneously. Devitt also acknowledges that people also form groups with commonalities within cultures and between cultures. She delineates three kinds of such groups: communities, which are "people who share substantial amounts of time together in common endeavors"; collectives, which are "people who gather
around a single repeated interest, without the frequency or intensity of contact of a community"; and social networks, which are "people who are connected once—or more—removed, through having common contact with another person or organization" (Writing 63). These different degrees of interaction among people in various types of relationships exemplify the difficulty in pinning down culture or context.

In addition, genres span communities, enabling relationships between and among them, and genres that develop within a community are sometimes meant for use by those outside it. So the relationships between genres and culture are varied and complex. Miller approaches the complexity in this way: "Rather than seeing [community] as comfortable and homogeneous and unified, I want to characterize it as fundamentally heterogeneous and contentious" ("Rhetorical" 74). Within this disunity, though, she sees genres as a stabilizing aspect: "In their pragmatic dimension, genres not only help people in spatio-temporal communities do their work and carry out their purposes; they also help virtual communities, the relationships we carry around in our heads, to reproduce and reconstruct themselves, to continue their stories" (75). So, genres can provide cohesiveness to a culture, but culture also has a role in "defin[ing] what situations and genres are possible or likely" (Devitt, Writing 25). Echoing Devitt, Coe indicates that genres define cultures as much as cultures define genres: "part of what defines a discourse community is the genre system it sanctions and empowers" ("New Rhetoric" 199). Indeed, he returns to the reciprocity of culture and genre by pointing out that using a genre "usually means ... invoking and/or reconstructing both the community's values and its view of the rhetorical situation" (199). Thus, culture influences genres and is, as a result, also influenced by the genres employed by participants in the culture.

Situated

Genres are also situated in smaller contexts; that is, they are located in or placed in relation to more particular aspects of their surroundings. Using Devitt's term, the context of situation refers to the "micro level" of context (Writing 31). Such a context differs slightly from traditional views of the rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, occasion) by adding social aspects such as participant roles and the relation of the recurring situation to purpose and to uses of language (Devitt, Writing 16). To clarify how situation is inherent to genre, Randy Bomer gives an example of seeing a piece of paper under his windshield wiper: it could be either a parking ticket or a flyer advertising something. Depending on the situa-
tion, he can anticipate which is most likely. When he’s handed a paper by an usher in a Broadway theater, it is probably a program: “Even before we look at it, we have oriented ourselves to ways of reading that genre and will read it only with those questions in mind that are usually answered by a playbill. Every piece of writing, every text we read, comes to us as both a text—the piece it is—and a kind of text—an instance of a genre” (117). Situation positions us to both receive and act with genres—and creates roles and relationships as we do so.

Like culture, situation is also reciprocal, as Devitt explains: “Genre and situation are tightly interwoven . . . but it is genre that determines situation as well as situation that determines genre. To say that genre responds to situation not only is deterministic but also oversimplifies their reciprocal relationship” (Writing 23). Devitt illustrates this situatedness when she explains that students writing letters to the editor for a class assignment will perform a different genre than a concerned citizen writing a letter to the editor would (22). The situations—the immediate, and particularly social, aspects of context such as purpose, participant roles, and exigencies, at least—differ, so the genre, as a consequence, does also.

**Ideological**

Because genres are social, cultural, and situated, it should be no surprise that they are also ideological, that they represent ways of thinking about and valuing the world. Berkenkotter and Huckin note that “genres signal a discourse community’s norms” (“Rethinking” 497), and Devitt explains how: “Because people in groups develop genres, genres reflect what the group believes and how it views the world” (Writing 59). Since genres are not just forms of social interaction but also ways of being, participating in genres involves assuming the ways of thinking that encompass those ways of being. Bazerman says that acting with genres causes participants to “take on the mood, attitude, and actional possibilities. . . . Adopt a frame of mind, set your hopes, plan accordingly, and begin acting” (“Genre” 13). He likens using genres to going to a place and taking on the character of the place: “If you hang around the race track long enough, you become one of those race track characters” (14).

Since genres are shaped by situation, they represent the values of participants in that situation. When users of genres come from a situation removed from that which created the genre, values may clash. Paré describes Inuit social workers being urged to more closely imitate the record-keeping conventions developed by their urban counterparts. The
ideologies of those detached, detailed records represented the values of the urban culture, not the close, almost familial, relationships of the Inuit culture, and this created a conflict for workers: “The workers’ dilemma indicates how participation in workplace genres situates writers in relations of power” (63). The use of these genres divided the “individual’s sense of identity” (66). In situations like this one with the Inuit workers, James Paul Gee suggests that users may suffer from the “extra cognitive work” that occurs because of conflicts between the ideologies of the genres being used and the personal ideologies of the users (158). These consequences to the ideologies of genres are not all bad, however; sometimes opening new ways of viewing the world might be beneficial. Devitt claims that “ideological power is not necessarily good or evil but rather . . . ambivalent: it works for both good and bad” (Writing 158). But these consequences—whether they’re perceived to be good or bad—do serve to illustrate that teaching and acting with genres carry social and political implications because of genres’ ideological aspects.

Because of ideology, what genres get taught in school and to whom, and whether they are taught as a matter of compliance or resistance, are all matters of concern. Peter Clements asserts that “teachers are never just instructing writers in the means and methods for realizing their thoughts more effectively on paper, but rather are coercing students into specific political choices about how to align themselves within various discourses” (203). Certainly teachers need to be aware of the ideologies of the genres they teach—and avoid what Tom Romano calls “a genre rut” when students become “Johnny-One-Genres” (“Teaching” 174). Journals represent an ideology as much as five-paragraph essays do. Romano urges teachers to “examine our courses and school curricula for genre hegemony. Does one genre dominate?” (174). If it does, what ideologies are we reinforcing for students? What ones are we ignoring?

As a result of these political/ideological aspects, some theorists urge that a critique of genres is essential to students’ adequate understanding of them. After explaining that rules control but resources enable, Lemke argues that “to teach genres without critique is not only unethical, it is intellectually faulty. The critique of a genre is what makes it into a resource. It is only when we understand the origins, history, and social functions of a genre, i.e. its politics, that we are empowered to make intelligent, informed decisions in our own interest about how we shall use it or change it” (5). However, teaching students to resist the ideologies of genres can be difficult: when they use a genre, even in imitation in classroom settings, they are acting somewhat according to the ideology inherent in that genre. Heather Marie Bastian argues that “when we
perform genres, we are positioned not only as situation-specific genre subjects but also [as] an overarching generic subject. And both of these positionings work to create complacent subjects” (7). By performing genres, then, students may not later be able to resist the ideologies of those genres.

As we can see, these are the characteristics of genre: social, rhetorical, dynamic, historical, cultural, situated, and ideological. Different theories about genre place varying degrees of emphasis on these characteristics, and doing this results in different views of what it means to use or learn a genre. Those differences are the foundation for and the results of the range of genre theories.

GENRE THEORIES

Traditional genre theory, as explained earlier, deals with customary definitions of genre: literary, form-focused, and fixed. More recent rhetorical genre theory focuses on (1) everyday, workplace, or school texts; (2) situation and context as they relate to textual regularities; (3) the dynamic, fluid nature of genres; (4) the blurring of boundaries; and (5) the ways genres develop from other genres. In contrast to traditional genre theory, this contemporary notion of genre theory recognizes genres as ideological and conceptual rather than neutral and concrete. Freedman and Medway also observe that contemporary genre theory is “descriptive, rather than prescriptive” (“Introduction” 3).

Within this broad generalization of contemporary genre theory, though, are a range of theories that differ on the various implications of genre concepts. Some of this difference has to do with place: theories that developed out of the Australian linguistic foundation have different concerns and theoretical origins than do those that developed out of the North American foundation. As Coe notes, “genre theories vary significantly” because they “are themselves motivated and situated” (“New Rhetoric” 198). In Australia, concerns with helping marginalized groups gain access to the social and economic mainstream were addressed by linguists looking for application of their ideas in schools. Widespread dissatisfaction with the more expressivist aspects of the writing process movement there influenced an approach to genre that emphasized practical aspects, including form. In contrast, in the United States, where the writing process movement had very strong support, rhetoricians’ interests in the social aspects of writing were more theoretical than practical. So although similar issues were at play in both regions, those stressed in Australia were not as vital in the United States. As a result, the differing
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Concrete Abstract

| Genre as ... Text | Rhetoric | Practice |

Figure 1. The Genre Theory Continuum

needs and input created different tangents for the direction of genre theory. What eventually developed among theorists across the world was a range of ideas for what genre theory really is: genre theories—plural.

Bazerman and Prior summarize the range of genre theories in this way: “Genre has been explored in recent decades from three quite different perspectives: as text, as rhetoric, and as practice” (“Participating” 138). As I interpret their summary, we could look at these different theoretical perspectives along a continuum, with genre as text as the most concrete theory and genre as practice as the most abstract. Theorists with these various perspectives emphasize different elements of common aspects of theory (Figure 1).

Genre as Text

Genre theories at one end of the continuum, genre as text, tend toward a formalist perspective. Although theorists look at the ways the features of the form reflect the social situation, they generally begin with the form. Thus, from this perspective, résumés put important information in prominent positions grouped under common headings—education, experience, references—and in noticeable styles because the audience is usually a busy professional looking quickly through a number of documents. Despite an understanding of the relationship between context and text, though, there is a tendency for those with this perspective to emphasize form more than situation.

This theoretical position, genre as text, depends on a somewhat traditional concept of genre—stable, though still responsive to context—since this point of view “rest[s] not on what a genre is . . . but on how genres are textually realized” (Bazerman and Prior, “Participating” 138). Instruction in genres often stems from this theoretical position. Because instructional plans in classrooms remove most genres from actual contexts and must rely on the stability of genres for teaching, forms are an obvious what’s left. A major goal for many in the genre as text group is to help marginalized groups find ways into the roles of power: if a person
can’t write a business letter, how likely is that person to get a job that will allow her to move into circles of influence? This goal explains a pedagogical inclination toward focusing on textual features: students would need fairly stable models and instruction in formal features to help them learn the genres.

However, Freedman and Medway note that providing equal access isn’t as simple as teaching the forms of genres: “Students from nondominant positions cannot become powerful by simply adopting the genres of power, since the latter embody values and assumptions opposed to those held by people outside the centres of power” (“Introduction” 15). Students have to act and be what the genres represent, not just copy the forms, to assume an insider position. And even if all it took to become part of the powerful was to adopt the forms of that culture, Kress stresses another problem with this theoretical position: “The emphasis on access to the genres of power would lead to a spurious kind of equity, in which there was no challenge to the existing status quo of social arrangements” (“Genre and the Changing Contexts” 464). In other words, students might be able to join the community but might never be aware of the ideological implications of that association. Also, the genre as text perspective may diminish students’ understanding of the dynamic aspect of genre and fail to acknowledge genres’ full complexity. Too much focus on form might suggest that genres are formulaic and might not provide students with a sense that users have options that can reflect situations and individual needs within those situations.

**Genre as Rhetoric**

Theorists in the more central position, *genre as rhetoric*, emphasize the social actions that give rise to a genre. Because certain situations have developed forms for acting in those situations, for these theorists, genres are ways of acting: “Writing is not only a skill; it is also a way of being and acting in the world at a particular time, in a particular situation, for the achievement of particular desires” (Bawarshi, *Genre* 156). As Bazerman and Prior explain it, this theoretical position “stays focused on textual features, but reads those features as parts of a sociorhetorical situation” (“Participating” 138). Visible textual features are seen as perspectives into a situation, not as ends in themselves. These theorists might begin with the text but move into a consideration of the ways the texts they explore both respond to situations and allow for variety and change in those situations. If forms arise from context, using those forms as a way to look back at the context seems logical, as Joseph M. Williams and
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Gregory G. Colomb assert: “When we learn social context, we are also learning its forms; but when we learn forms, we may also be learning their social contexts” (262). From this perspective, writing isn’t only, or even primarily, about the text anymore; it’s also about the situation surrounding the writing, about understanding that situation, and about ensuring that the rhetorical choices made in using a genre are effective for the situation and the user.

Devitt notes limitations to this perspective, though: “Interpreting discourse features thus requires not only situational but also cultural astuteness. . . . It is difficult for those who have not acted through the genres to recognize the full meaning and significance of textual features” (Writing 53). Thus, when texts are considered in relation to context, all the values and ideologies inherent in the culture and situation might not be visible to outsiders who look at the text alone.

Genre as Practice

The third perspective, genre as practice, begins “with the process of making genres” rather than with the genres themselves (Bazerman and Prior, “Participating” 139). Theorists in this range see “textual practices as fundamental to generic action” and emphasize the “dynamic, fluid, heterogeneous, and situated” aspects of genres (138). These theorists focus more on the contexts and processes related to genre use than on the genres themselves, or they see genres as actions, ways of being, rather than texts. Because those with this perspective emphasize the dynamic aspect of genres—their “fragility, plasticity, and heterogeneity” (139)—as central to genre theory, they are more likely to try to describe genre change in a particular setting and focus on the instability of genres than they are to look at a text as an artifact that would provide a lens into a situation or as a text that would represent a situation, as the other two perspectives do.

Theorists with this perspective rarely promote a pedagogical application of theory because “learning genres involves learning to act—with other people, artifacts, and environments, all of which are themselves in ongoing processes of change and development” (Bazerman and Prior, “Participating” 147). For these theorists, the focus is on the characteristics of genre interaction, on ways of creating meaning, on the actions genres enable. Not only can a genre be a way of making a text and a way of acting in a certain situation but it can also be a way to make sense of a situation, a way to view the world. Thus, this theoretical position emphasizes ideologies and perspectives, actions rather than texts.
THEORIES IN PRACTICE

Does it matter that theorists can't come to a single, unified theory about genres? Not really. In fact, our thinking and practice can be richer for this diversity of thought. What does matter is our understanding of how these various theories of genre play out in practice, of their possibilities and potential for student learning. The nature of the differences in theory results in very divergent views on what theory should look like in classrooms. Mindful teachers, to adapt Richard Fulkerson's use of Charles Silberman's term, know what theory is represented in their pedagogy.

The initial model proposed for instruction from the genre as text perspective established a three-part pattern: (1) examination of a model text, (2) followed by group imitation of the text, (3) leading to individual imitation of the text. The model was critiqued as too focused on form and on academic genres, thus stifling creativity and personal expression. This criticism came despite the assertion by J. R. Martin, Frances Christie, and Joan Rothery (the model's authors) years earlier that "it is very important to recognize that genres make meaning: they are not simply a set of formal structures into which meanings are poured" (64). In response to the criticism and as a result of dialogue among educators, the model was revised.

J. R. Martin's revised model presents a more contextualized interpretation of genre (128). It begins with students investigating the social context of a genre before they examine the genre (text) itself. To have students move away from seeing texts simply as forms, guiding questions for examining the text relate to functions and relationships, not only to formal features. After students practice independent construction of texts, they are encouraged to reflect on (and critique) the genre, questioning the ideas and relationships the genre privileges. The revised model, then, moves toward a more theoretically rich understanding of genre by having students investigate context before looking at sample texts and critique the genre after creating their own imitations.

The interest in equity exhibited by those who favor this theoretical position is admirable; the potential for focus on text forms, sometimes to the point of formulas, is less representative of genre theory than some theorists like. Given the first try at making this model work in classrooms and how formulaic it became, critics feel that the revised approach may still endorse a tendency, in some teachers' hands, to diminish the idea of genre until it's almost a fill-in-the-blank concept, especially if there is limited variety in the examples of the studied genre and a focus on replicating one example. However, when Julie E. Wollman-Bonilla observed teachers following a process similar to this model, she noted that the
teachers “did not explicitly discuss grammatical choices” but rather modeled the grammatical and structural options in interactive writing with the students, thus moving away from teaching genres as formulas (41). Therefore, it seems that an approach based on genre as text may be highly dependent on each individual teacher’s use of the instructional model and her understanding of theory as it informs practice.

The genre as rhetoric group looks at texts as responses to situations and thereby links the two aspects of genre theory that are most consistent among the different approaches—text and context. The method of instruction is less patterned than the genre as text’s plan, but it generally involves examining a specific context, the people involved in that context, and the texts they use. Students analyze a variety of sample texts and ask questions about the noticeable features, not primarily to identify the features but more to determine how those features both reflect and respond to the situations the genres come from and to evaluate how effective the rhetorical choices might be in a particular situation. As Coe notes, this perspective of genre alters some basic conceptions about the teaching of writing; at the very least, he says, it should encourage writers to “recognize that different writing situations require different types of writing, that what is good in a piece of academic literary criticism may not be good in a newspaper book review and will very likely not be good in a brochure” (“New Rhetoric” 200). It should help students see how writing derives from and responds to situations that require action.

In some cases of practice from this theoretical perspective, students replicate the genres; in others the investigation of the relationship between text and context is the sole purpose of the questioning. Some theorists worry that this approach still focuses too much on the text, not allowing enough room for the change and variation that is part of genre theory, especially if the samples students investigate are too limited in number or too similar to each other. Other theorists wonder if it’s really possible to see the whole situation from outside the context, just by looking at the text. They believe this method of exploration would provide a somewhat superficial sense of the situation and therefore a somewhat limited ability to determine rhetorical effectiveness.

The genre as practice group focuses most on the context and the dynamic nature of genres, to the point that some adherents assert that genres are impossible to teach in a classroom. Instead, proponents take an approach similar to Gee’s applications of learned versus acquired literacy, in which he states that “someone cannot engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner. You are either in it or you’re not. Discourses are connected with displays of an identity” (155). Applying this...
perspective to writing and writing instruction, Sidney I. Dobrin explains: "The systems by which we interpret are not codifiable in any logical manner since discourse does not operate in any logico-systemic manner and never remains static long enough to develop concrete understandings of the communicative interaction. In other words, there are no codifiable processes by which we can characterize, identify, solidify, grasp discourse, and, hence, there is no way to teach discourse, discourse interpretation, or discourse disruption" (132–33).

Theorists from other theoretical positions (genre as text and genre as rhetoric) might question the value of the theory if it can't have an impact in educating students in writing and reading, although Dobrin defends that, too: “Classroom application need not always be the measure for value of theory” (133). Still, teachers might wonder how to prepare students for writing outside of school if there is no way to replicate situational contexts in classes and therefore no way to teach about genres until students encounter them on their own. Some theorists at this end of the continuum recommend, instead, teaching awareness of genres “to inculcate receptive skills . . . turn[ing] away from developing rhetorical skills and toward development of rhetorical sensibilities” (Petraglia 62). Thus, teachers with this perspective might be more likely to teach about context than about texts. Those with other theoretical perspectives and social agendas might find such an approach an evasion of the hard work of teaching writing as well as a route to reduced opportunities for equity.

In a very general way, this is an overview of contemporary genre theory and its uses in the classroom. Like the tip of an iceberg, there is more complexity and detail to the theory than is presented here. A passage in Devitt’s book hints at the depth of thinking that has occurred, is occurring, and will occur related to genre theory: “Many areas of genre theory still need further research and exploration. For example, not all genres allow a simple matchup with a particular set of contexts; some might interact with multiple contexts. Not all contexts that people define as recurring produce recognized genres, and some may produce more than one genre. People may, of course, mix genres and mix contexts, and they may use genres badly. Genres may be unsuccessful, fail, or die out. Genre is too rich a subject to be mined completely in just one volume” (Writing 31). With these words, Devitt acknowledges some of the questions still to be addressed by theorists. In the appendixes, I address some additional questions and issues related to genre theory. In an effort to address some of the concerns Devitt mentions, I also explain a little more about some of the new directions in which genre theory is moving.
3 Pedagogical Challenges and Principles

CHALLENGES

As I've already indicated, there are obvious difficulties in translating genre theory into classroom practice. As Ann M. Johns points out, "there are direct contradictions between what the theoreticians and researchers continue to discover about the nature of genres and the everyday requirements of the classroom" ("Destabilizing" 237). In addition to a common apprehension that a genre approach will emphasize form and neglect the social action of a genre, we can add that trying to infer the social context from the genre, a way to move beyond forms, is also possibly problematic.

Additionally, there are questions about whether genres can be taught in schools at all because they would occur out of their normal context. Freedman and Medway address this constraint to pedagogy: "School writing may imitate and adapt features of working genres but cannot be those genres; it is doomed, whatever its transparent features, to remain school writing, a solution to a quite different set of exigencies" ("Introduction" 13-14). Given the current understanding about genres, it is expected that many theorists would claim that it is not possible to teach them in school because such instruction occurs away from "real" contexts. Reiff refers to Freedman and David Bleich, who both feel "that genres—like all language use—are not eligible for study once they are considered to be independent of their contexts of use" (Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff 553). David F. Kaufer and Cheryl Geisler seem to agree when they posit that "one must wonder how students ever grasp what it means to be an insider when their practice remains on the outside" (306). They acknowledge that students may learn conventions, although they believe those are also better learned in context, but they assert that the "tacit beliefs" necessary to act with genres can't be learned outside of their context (306).

Because of decontextualization, critics worry that all that will be left for instruction is the forms of genres, an emphasis that misses the point of genre theory altogether. Freedman and Medway stress this point: "According to our new, more rhetorically informed view, however, producing an example of a genre is a matter not just of generating a text with
certain formal characteristics but of using generic resources to act effectively on a situation through a text” (“Introduction” 11). They add that knowing the formal characteristics of a genre is simple in comparison to doing the real work genres do. The hard part is that teaching genres in school is often teaching them out of context, therefore increasing a tendency to focus on formal properties of texts. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran note this problem in their review of writing textbooks that claim a genre focus. Their review shows that, “despite their attempts to construe genre as rhetorical action, [these textbooks] too often slide toward a representation of genre as decontextualized form” (15). They refer to Alan Luke’s use of the term “freeze-drying” (15) to describe the way genres are often approached in schools, an approach that negates genres’ dynamic, responsive character by limiting students’ exposure to a few models shown in class. Teachers who use a genre approach would have to be very conscious of this tendency and watchful to avoid it.

Balancing instruction with implicit learning about genres seems to be the approach some theorists prefer. Mary Soliday describes the balance in this way:

Bakhtin’s theory suggests that if we want to help writers assimilate genre, we must remain aware of the dynamic between the individual writer’s intentions and the constraints of form. In composition, two approaches to genre reflect this dynamic: explicit knowing, which reflects a community’s traditions or expectations, and implicit knowing, which reflects how individuals meet those expectations. In my view the first approach includes making tacit knowledge explicit by designing rubrics, describing the purposes of form, and providing maps of textual features such as annotated models. Though of course these approaches will overlap, in general implicit learning includes modeling genre through class talk, offering regular feedback, and sequencing assignments. (79–80)

From this perspective, then, some of what teachers do explicitly in the classroom may enhance implicit learning about genres in actual situations where students find themselves because it builds awareness of genre difference and of some ways that genres act in different situations.

Arguing that an understanding of genre takes more than simply being in the presence of genres, Bazerman asserts that “going to the place [the genre’s space] is only the first step, for once you are there you need access and encouragement to engage with particular people in particular roles, use particular resources, and take part in particular experiences and activities” (“Genre and Identity” 14). Although he might call it socialization instead of instruction, he also seems to suggest that some understanding of how to observe, how to make sense of a situation, and
how to act are essential to learning genres—and these skills could be developed in schools, through instruction and practice.

Ways to help students gain these understandings could be learned outside a particular situation, as Gee suggests in his claims about literacy learning. First, he differentiates between learning and acquisition, noting that acquisition occurs in context and learning occurs in school. He claims that we are better at performing what we acquire, but we are better at explaining what we learn. Although he argues for literacy as largely acquired rather than learned, he recommends that students practice “mushfake Discourse”—what sounds like pretend genres (159). He explains mushfake as a prison term that means “to make do with something less when the real thing is not available. . . . I propose that we ought to produce ‘mushfaking’, resisting students, full of meta-knowledge” (159). In other words, he suggests that, in school, students learn aspects of genres such as language and form (a kind of genre as text) through practice with strategies and reflection so that they understand the concepts related to genres, even though they are not situated in actual contexts where those genres act. With such an approach, students can be prepared through instruction to interact with genres in authentic situations outside of school. Certainly his proposal has some merit because it addresses issues related to artificial contexts and transfer.

To address the issue of lack of context from another perspective, some theorists assert that school is itself a social setting and therefore a viable context for learning about genres—school genres, in particular. From the school context, students can gain genre experience that will provide an awareness of genres that is transferable to genre understanding outside of the classroom. Bazerman addresses this perspective when he asserts that school is a real social setting that allows for generic activity: “We have started to see how the classroom is a particular scene of writing—neither an innately natural nor an innately artificial scene; neither necessarily an oppressive nor necessarily a liberating scene; just a scene of writing” (“Where” 26). Bawarshi builds on this argument when he speaks of first-year writing (FYW) courses, although his argument can be made for most writing classrooms: “Seen in this light, the FYW course is not as artificial as some critics make it out to be. . . . The classroom in its own right is a dynamic, textured site of action mediated by a range of complex written and spoken genres that constitute student-teacher positions, relations, and practices” (Genre 118). Contemporary genre theory has complicated some aspects of genre for the classroom, but it has also opened some up because it helps us see the classroom as a site of action, capable of generic activity.
Since most approaches to genre involve using samples as part of the investigation, another problem raised in genre instruction is critics' concern that writing will be replaced by reading in the classroom, thereby undoing the emphasis on student writing gained in the last few decades. Furthermore, process advocates contend that reading a product cannot give writers an understanding of process and may even inhibit writing development as students look to the samples as rigid forms or as “too perfect” to even be attempted. Certainly these are valid concerns that teachers would need to address when implementing a genre approach in the classroom.

Despite these challenges, what genre theory can teach students about using language is too important to give up. Freedman and Medway, despite their concerns about the lack of context, acknowledge that there is some benefit in using a genre approach in schools when they assert that it can “grant experience of the ways of thinking or procedures for handling concepts and styles of deployment of argument that are employed in the professional domain” (“Introduction” 14). Genre theory can give us a new perspective for teaching writing. By carefully employing a genre approach in our writing instruction, we can improve our work with students and their success in using writing for their own purposes.

**PRINCIPLES**

As Devitt notes, “the teaching of genres . . . must develop thoughtfully, critically, and with recognition of the complexity, benefits, and dangers of the concept of genre” (Writing 191). Since most approaches to teaching will probably fall short of theory in some respect, keeping some guiding principles in mind may help us avoid the worst of the pitfalls and help us remember, as Johns counsels, that there is not “one ‘true way’ to approach genre theory or practice” (Preface i). Because of the challenges in teaching genres in classrooms, I offer the following principles to guide that instruction in ways that will most benefit students in acquiring the attitudes and abilities needed to write and use genres effectively.

**Connection**

Freedman notes that “interaction is at the heart of the genre” (“Situating” 180). Because of that, a key instructional principle must be keeping genre and context as connected as possible. According to Johns, separating texts from contexts reduces them to “artifacts for study rather than
tools for achieving ‘repeated social action’ (Miller, 1984)” (“Destabilizing” 239). Devitt lists several reasons for keeping them connected: “Generic forms must be embedded within their social and rhetorical purposes so that rhetorical understanding can counter the urge toward formula. Genres must be embedded within their social and cultural ideologies so that critical awareness can counter potential ideological effects” (Writing 191). So, teachers need to keep context and text connected to help students avoid seeing genre as formula and for them to gain critical awareness. We might also add that the connection can help students see genres as ways to act, not just ways to write.

Some theorists suggest using texts as a way into context. With this approach, teachers help students notice the features that recur regularly through multiple samples of a genre. Once they have noticed the features, students speculate as to what the features might respond to or what they might accomplish for the users. Thus, students anticipate the social purposes and connect those purposes to textual features. Some of the potential limitations of this approach have been mentioned earlier. One is that it can be difficult to see contextual connections—and some theorists suggest that it is almost impossible, as Freedman implies when she poses these questions: “If the textual features are secondary to the prior communicative purpose, is there any value in explicating these textual features out of context as a way of teaching the genre? Or, if genres are responses to contexts, can they be learned out of context by explicating features and specifying rules of either form or context?” (“Show” 225). However, inferring context from text can be constrained by our experience. If students’ experience is limited, this inferred connection from text to context may take extra effort for them to discover.

Another challenge with this approach is that it can be very hard to identify ideology. For instance, many instructors teach students about résumés, and students learn the general aspects of the form. Students may recognize how the features respond to a social situation—a busy reader who wants to gather information specific to the situation quickly—but as T. Shane Peagler and Kathleen Blake Yancey point out, students often don’t see résumés as “written in the context of any rhetorical situation” (154). As Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi report, Randall Popken has identified the ideological aspect of résumés that students may not notice so easily from the “subjectless sentences,” the “physical constraints,” and the “prescribed categories” (Scenes 159–60): “By downplaying the voice and persona of résumé writers, the résumé depersonalizes job seekers, portraying them as commodities that can be sold” (159). Students also
need to identify ideologies so that they can learn to critique a genre and make the most effective connections between text and context. This may be more difficult than it seems.

Instead of looking first at texts and through them to contexts, Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi, in *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*, propose a reverse order to ensure connection between text and context: “Teach students to move from observation of the writing scene and its shared goals, to the rhetorical interactions that make up the situations of this scene (the readers, writers, purposes, subjects, and settings), to the genres used to participate within the situations and scenes” (xviii). In their approach, Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi provide guided analysis to help students analyze situations and the genres within them. In this way, they hope that students are better able to see any genre as embedded in a situation rather than separate from it. Certainly there is still, will always be, the possibility of reducing genres to textual forms; however, the intent is that starting with context first will minimize that tendency. Part of this approach also includes critiquing genres, with questions (including the following) as ways to help students accomplish this important task of trying to see the ideologies of genres, too:

- What does the genre allow its users to do and what does it not allow them to do?
- Whose needs are most served by the genre? Whose needs are least served?
- Does the genre enable its users to represent themselves fully?
- Do the assumptions that the genre reflects privilege certain ways of doing things?
- Does the genre allow its users to do certain things at the expense of others? And if so, at what cost? (161)

By beginning with the context and including specific ways to address ideology, this approach works at keeping genres and context connected effectively.

Pang reports on a study comparing the two approaches: one beginning with texts to determine their features and, from them, their functions in the context, and the other looking at a context first and then at the texts that grow out of it. To uncover which approach would give students the best strategy for future use with genres they didn’t know, students from each approach explored other genres and were asked to determine the “possible discourse purposes underlying each genre and to select moves appropriate for each purpose” (152). The results? “Both approaches yielded almost equal results in the quality of the subjects’
writing products and their use of strategies to compose” (158). Pang acknowledges some key features of the teaching in both approaches that he sees as contributing to the finding: “Both approaches in the study avoid the learning of formulae. Instead, learners were encouraged to formulate their own ‘rules.’ Above all, learners needed to familiarize themselves with the idea of choice, of making choices based on informed judgments of the wider sociocultural context, and identifying the interpersonal, ideational/experiential, and textual variables in the immediate situation of communication” (158). We can conclude that either approach—starting with texts or starting with contexts—can benefit students as genre users if the teacher keeps text and context connected, resists students’ inclinations to look at genres simplistically (as forms), and helps students see genres as both social and individual.

Other theorists recommend using genres in the context of the classroom as a way to make an authentic connection between genres and situation. Under this proposed course of action, teachers would help students see the situation that exists in schools and classrooms, the actions school writing is meant to accomplish, and the roles students are expected to assume for writing in those situations—including testing. With these understandings, students could then make better choices from the range of rhetorical options available to them for each kind of writing. For example, teachers could have students use genres in the classroom to accomplish classroom tasks, such as writing memos requesting procedural changes in the classroom. Teachers could also have students use genres to conduct schoolwork that connects to the world outside the classroom, such as writing letters for information they need or conducting interviews for research. Students could also conduct mini-ethnographies, since these use genre analysis to create a genre. With any of these methods, the situation and the genre are connected through actual practice that allows students to act within the classroom context.

Despite her own preferences, Devitt asserts that her “point is not to argue for a particular pedagogical strategy as much as to argue for pedagogical strategies that keep generic form and generic contexts united” (Writing 200). However we can keep them together—through sequencing or through making authentic texts in the classroom—connection is key to effective instruction.

Creativity
When it comes to teaching genre, an important principle should be teaching genres “as both constraint and choice so that individual awareness
can lead to individual creativity” (Devitt, Writing 191). One issue raised about a genre approach is that it could limit writers’ creativity through a focus on either the forms or the social aspect of genres. Devitt addresses this concern with an attention to balance:

Research on creativity helps us, too, with how to teach students to be both communicative and creative. Writers need both convergence and divergence. . . . Students need to learn how to make their texts fit within the patternings of converging situations and texts; they also need to learn how to diverge from those patternings in order to say what they want to say. Both kinds of learning are learning about genre. Both kinds of learning are necessary to encourage students’ creativity. Both kinds of learning can also enable students to critique the social values, assumptions, and beliefs that have shaped those patternings, those genres. Helping students discover the rhetorical and social strategies behind the forms, their purposes and effects, what conformity they allow and what choices they require can develop students’ critical as well as creative abilities. (Writing 156)

One way teachers address creativity in teaching genres is to begin with the belief that genres offer options as much as—or more than—they do limitations. In their work with teachers from several countries, Heather Kay and Tony Dudley-Evans found reservations “that the genre-based approach is restrictive, especially in the hands of unimaginative teachers” (311). “Unimaginative” teachers would be those who don’t see that, as William Strong phrases it, a genre “has fixed conventions, but it also has flexible slots” (163). With that concern in mind, teachers should approach genres differently, as flexible forms, rather than representing them as fixed structures. Even with this understanding, it is still possible for students to interpret genres as rule bound, as Peagler and Yancey note (160). However, with a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, teacher stance, students are more likely to develop appropriate perspectives about genres and creativity.

The use of samples or exemplars is one way teachers can help students see creativity and flexibility in genres. As Devitt explains, it “seems clear from all research that writers need to be familiar with a genre to write it well” (Writing 209). Using samples is important, but there are problems when teachers use models limited either in breadth or in number. Courtney B. Cazden gives an example of an Australian woman who as a child had learned about only “wooley white sheep” in school. When she saw brown sheep, she didn’t know what they were: “I fear that identification of sheep with whiteness exemplifies the dangers of impoverished, stereotyped, and therefore inflexible concepts that are too often
the outcomes of our teaching, including—of most relevance here—the teaching of genres” (7). The potential pitfalls of using limited samples should be clear from this example: we don’t want students to view genres through such a narrow perspective.

An obvious way to help students avoid looking at samples as formulas is to provide a broad variety of them—as Devitt says, “as wide a range of samples as possible, ones reflecting different uses of language and form even while achieving similar purposes in similar settings” (Writing 200). With an array of samples, teachers can encourage students to focus on their diverse nature. We have a tendency to look for similarities naturally, so emphasizing variety will reinforce the flexibility of genres. Similarly, Chapman recommends asking students to “deconstruct and reconstruct [genres] to understand and own them. In this way, the use of models may be process oriented (to foster genre awareness) rather than product oriented (to produce a piece of writing that adheres to a particular set of conventions)” (488). Looking for the variety themselves can reinforce students’ understanding of genres as flexible and responsive to situation.

Nevertheless, even when teachers use multiple samples, problems with this approach don’t disappear. Devitt finds that “students easily turn samples into models, and models easily turn writing into formula. . . . Even given a range of samples of a genre, writers might well narrow their view to a single text, which they may then treat as a prototype or exemplar of that genre” (Writing 209). Despite this potential hazard, though, using samples is better than not using them: “To ask students to write new genres with no samples of those genres is to reduce their learning by increasing their anxiety” (209). Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton try to avoid potential problems by referring to samples as “mentor texts” rather than models (129). A shift in vocabulary—using the word mentor, suggesting a guide or advisor, as opposed to model, which implies a pattern to be followed—might enable students to move away from reducing sample texts to forms and toward seeing them as options.

Teachers also encourage creativity when they ask students to consider the purposes behind the options they find in the samples. Students may not be right in their guesses, but they will still be learning to think about situations and rhetorical choices and how they could connect. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran assert that the exploration of possible purposes should involve a “good deal of interaction and negotiation wherein students’ views are respected: interactions between teacher and students, between student and students, and between reading and writing” (252). Repeatedly theorists and researchers acknowledge the value
of rich discourse in classes using a genre approach. Giving students opportunities to talk about genres aids their learning and supports the social aspect of genre instruction: they can see and question choices and their effects on others in the classroom. Such talk will also allow students to explore how far they can stretch a genre’s boundaries: When does it become another genre? What are the effects of those boundary-stretching choices? Such classroom discourse enhances the concept of creativity in relation to genres.

When teachers make sure students see flexibility in genres, they should not then undermine that progress by using grading criteria that are so narrowly focused that flexibility is actually discouraged or so broadly stated that they could apply to any piece of writing. Instead of advocating what he calls “all-purpose criteria,” Charles R. Cooper recommends instead “genre-specific criteria, which are particularly helpful as guidelines for the writer, for peer critique, and for self-evaluation” (31). When creating genre-specific criteria, to avoid a too-narrow focus, Devitt urges teachers to use criteria “described in terms of their purposes and settings” rather than features of form (Writing 208). So, instead of asking for five adjectives to establish setting in the introductory paragraph, the rubric could ask for adequate details so that the reader can visualize the setting of a personal narrative. Since students are as likely to use assessment criteria as other aspects of the class in refining their understanding of genre, it is particularly important that we develop genre-specific criteria that teach about genres but still allow room for creativity and individuality.

Rhetoric

Many of our students harbor the misconception that writing well in one situation requires the same strategies and actions as writing well in another situation. But genres are rhetorical: “Rhetoric is the use of language to accomplish something, and rhetorical choices are the decisions speakers and writers make in order to accomplish something with language” (Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi 6). A genre approach is rhetorical because it pays attention to the situation and the strategies unique to each communicative action. As David Foster explains, “writing becomes a meaningful event, in this view, not because the writer follows the right steps in producing the text, but because she reads the situation and the reader accurately and finds ways to adapt her language to the contingent requirements of the writing moment” (153). Good writing, therefore, is rhetorical and situated. Whether it’s good depends on its context and how
effectively it does its job in that context. Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi suggest that the following choices are rhetorical:

- What sort of tone and language to use;
- How to engage and address others;
- How to develop, organize, and present one’s ideas so that others can relate to them;
- What kinds of examples to use when communicating;
- When and how to start talking and when and how to stop. (6)

They assert that “the more appropriate your rhetorical choices, the more likely you are to communicate effectively” (6). Effective action with genres depends on appropriate rhetorical choices.

Coe explains that “the proper first step for preparing to teach a particular genre is often to locate it in rhetorical situation and context of situation” (“Teaching” 161). Students should consider the relationship they are establishing and the situational aspects that come to bear on the relationship that show up in the writing. To do this, Coe recommends “that each piece of writing have a specifically defined rhetorical situation which may be stipulated by the assignment or the student” (162). Then, for each assignment, students include on the title page the rhetorical context—purpose, audience, occasion (genre)—and the teacher assesses the paper on how well it addresses its designated context (162).

Rhetorical writing includes being strategic because it involves writers making choices dependent upon their goals. Those choices are intentional, planned, tactical. They respond to audience, to purpose, to situation, and to genre. Being rhetorical and strategic, Joseph J. Comprone suggests, can support an important aspect of a genre approach: “This emphasis on developing strategies to guide choice making in the process of producing written text can become the theoretical basis for introducing rhetorical technique and method into writing courses; it can also become a way of developing an approach to literacy through which the mediation of socially constructed genres and individual choice making within particular textual situations can be accomplished” (102). The idea of developing students’ abilities to see writing as making choices is particularly important. A genre approach must include making rhetorical choices strategically, because genres respond to varying situations and writers act with them.

Reflection

Peter Smagorinsky and Michael W. Smith encourage the “mindful attention to transfer—that is the conscious and deliberate application of knowl-
edge in contexts other than the one originally studied” (291). Because teachers cannot teach all genres students will ever need to know, it is important that genre knowledge acquired from the genres used in classrooms transfer to other genre situations students act in. That transfer occurs through metacognitive processing—reflection—that takes place when students contemplate “a genre and one’s own positioning using that genre” (Herrington and Moran 252). Smagorinsky and Smith, citing research by D. N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, also assert that “teachers who ‘persistently and systematically . . . saturate the context of education with attention to transfer’ (p. 29) will improve the likelihood that students will reapply the knowledge when they shift domains” (291).

Reflection provides a place for students to articulate understanding, thereby enhancing the chances for transfer of learning.

Carl Nagin, in Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools, observes that “to develop as writers, students also need the opportunity to articulate their own awareness and understanding of their processes in learning to write. Research has shown the importance of such metacognitive thinking in becoming a better writer” (National Writing Project 82). Yancey also sees reflection as an important part of writers’ development when she concludes that “over time . . . reflection provides the ground where the writer invents, repeatedly and recursively, a composing self. Concurrently, reflection contributes to the writing of texts that themselves are marked by reflective tenor—multi-contextual, thoughtful, holistic” (200). These findings seem to suggest that the kind of writer who has the ability to be and practices being reflective is the kind of writer who will be sensitive to genre, to situation, to context, and to relationships established through genres. Reflection may even be a necessity to help students resist seeing genres as forms and recognize ideologies as well.

Yancey, in addressing the genres students use to reflect, observes that those genres are as important as the genres they reflect on: “If the point, ultimately, of reflection is to encourage reflective writers, and if we expect those writers to work in various genres, then it might make sense to ask for more than one kind of reflective text” (154). She proposes cover letters, individual annotations, or “final reflective essay[s]” in their portfolios (69), Talk-To’s and Talk-Backs (108), or a number of other genres varying in formality that students can use to respond to their own writing. Any of these would be valuable components of a genre approach because they help students look more critically not only at their own generic responses but also at the situations in which they occur and the relationships and roles they acknowledge or don’t. Such reflection moves
students’ work with genres beyond the level of an “assignment” that they complete and turn in to a part of their overall learning and development as writers and as actors in social situations.

Smagorinsky and Smith note that for reflection to be effective, it needs to be “an integral part of the class structure rather than a tag at the end of a lesson; [Gavriel] Salomon (1987) has found that most students are decidedly unmindful unless specifically and vigorously cued” (291). Yancey makes the same point about the need to make reflection an integral part of the writing classroom: “For reflection to be generative and constructive . . . it must be practiced, must itself be woven not so much throughout the curricula as into it” (201). These are powerful reminders that the reflective attitude is an integral part of a genre approach because of the need to consider all writing as social and situated. Reflection is that and does that.

**CHOOSING GENRES**

The choice of genres for classroom exploration is of singular importance. First, as Devitt reminds us, “whatever genres are taught will also entail not teaching others” (Writing 206). Choosing some genres means, by necessity, leaving others out. Additionally, since genres provide ways of viewing the world, the genres we select favor and develop certain perspectives more than others. Repeatedly selecting five-paragraph essays promotes logic and distance. Repeatedly selecting personal narratives promotes individual and chronological perspectives. Consistently choosing work-related genres shows a valuing of one worldview, while consistently choosing poetry shows another.

So, how do we pick? Heather Lattimer selects genres for classroom study by looking first at state and district standards. Sometimes these standards include textual descriptions like informational text or personal narrative. Within such broad categories—what William Grabe calls macro-genres (252) and Vijay K. Bhatia calls genre colonies (280)—Lattimer selects genres such as memoir or feature article. She warns “against choosing genre studies that are too broadly or too narrowly defined,” such as “nonfiction,” because the category “quickly becomes unwieldy” (8). She also considers students’ future use of a genre, especially public use—what she calls “authenticity” (9). Coe also suggests choosing on the basis of students’ future needs: genres students will be motivated to learn (such as college entrance essays) and ones teaching patterns of thinking that students will need (analysis, for example) (Johns et al. 246). The goals of the course and the students’ experiences with
genres are also important determining factors in the selection process. Devitt proposes, as one option, that teachers find genres that overlap with those students have already encountered, so that students can “draw on known genres to tackle unfamiliar situations” (Writing 207). Chapman supports Devitt’s approach because “current thinking suggests that we learn new genres by forming analogies and making connections with the ones we already know” (472). When we do select genres that build on students’ current genre knowledge, however, we should also ensure that the genres we introduce offer a variety, allowing students to see ways that genres are alike and ways that they differ. Such variety will develop their awareness of genres.

Selecting carefully, keeping in mind the course, the students, and the contexts of the genres, will help students gain exposure to the genres that will be most beneficial to them in the long term. No schooling can possibly address all the genres a person will act with throughout a lifetime: schools don’t have the time and teachers don’t have the prescience to see the future of each student in the classroom. Instead, teachers should select with the idea of creating the best foundation of genre understanding possible—what Devitt calls antecedent genres: “The criteria for choosing genres should include which genres best supplement students’ existing genre repertoires and may serve as especially rich antecedent genres” (Writing 203).

Antecedent genres are those genres we understand from prior experience that come to bear on current genre experience. As Bazerman explains it, “when we travel to new communicative domains, we construct our perception of them beginning with the forms we know” (“The Life” 19). Judith A. Langer’s research with young children confirms the influence of antecedent genres: “The functional forms [children] hear and use in their daily lives serve as their models” (185). Jamieson’s study of inaugural addresses makes this point too: “rhetors do perceive unprecedented situations through antecedent genres” (414). If students use the genres they know to act in new situations, then selecting genres to teach is important for providing the best foundation for future genre acquisition and learning. As Devitt points out, “individuals can only draw from genres they know. . . . The more genres they know, the more potential antecedent genres they have for addressing new situations” (Writing 204). Teachers’ choices and use of genres can have an important impact on students’ futures. We need to ensure that the genres studied or used in classes provide rich antecedent genres for students’ future experience with genres.
Despite the identified need to expose students to many genres, Devitt notes that “not all genres serve as equally appropriate or equally helpful . . . antecedents” (Writing 206). Lattimer avoids diaries in a genre study for this reason: for her, they are not beneficial as an antecedent genre because they are not representative of the genres adults use to interact with others. Rich antecedents would be those that have more carryover with other genres and that are used more regularly in social interactions.

However, simply having exposure to genres or using them isn’t all that influences students’ appropriate use of genre knowledge in the future. They also have to learn to choose from their antecedent knowledge appropriately. As Jamieson’s study shows, “the antecedent genres chosen may not be appropriate to the situation” (414). Teachers confront this problem with selection when their students use language from commercials to write persuasion or summarize a story instead of analyzing it. Because of this inappropriate use of antecedents, students need to understand genres from a contextual and ideological perspective as well as from a textual one. If they are aware of the contexts and purposes and audiences for a particular genre, they will be more likely to choose appropriately from their genre repertoire when they face a new situation.

Many factors influence our choices of which genres to teach. And those choices are important. Still, whatever we select, we should also remember Coe’s admonition that “developing an awareness that different situations call for writing in different genres is far more important than learning any particular genre” (Johns et al. 247). That’s something a genre approach can help us do.

The teaching ideas that follow attempt to address key concepts of genre theory in the best way possible for the secondary-level classroom. I acknowledge that not all applications will be appreciated by all genre theorists, however. These applications address genre as text and genre as rhetoric, as well as concepts about genre that might satisfy those at the genre as practice end of the continuum.