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A Literature Review of Genre

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Instructor's Note

In this paper, Calvin uses *Rhetorical Genre Theory* to give an extended definition of the term "genre." He then uses that theory as the basis of his analysis of an important genre to him major: scientific research articles in geology. The paper is organized into two sections: a literature review where he sets up his theoretical framework based on previous research on genre, and his own research on the scientific research article. The main purpose of this paper was for students to be able to use the concepts of rhetorical genre theory to help them figure out the types of writing— and the conventions of that writing—done by professionals in their major. Calvin was able to use some very difficult theoretical texts very effectively and then was able to apply that theory to his example genre in sophisticated ways that showed a deep understanding of all the texts.

Writer's Biography

Calvin Anderson is a freshman Geology major from central Ohio. He is characterized by a zeal for the Bible, a love for his family, and an enthusiasm for geology.

A Literature Review of Genre

Genre theory seeks to understand the relationship between groups of people and how they communicate. Since language and communicative norms are in a continual state of change, genre theory is constantly in need of new research. This literature review will attempt to add to the ongoing discussion of genre by improving its definition, and by providing a modern example through genre analysis of geological research articles.

While some authors describe genre as being primarily characterized by a set of formal traits (Measell), many genre theorists see the need to develop a more complex and accurate definition. It has been demonstrated

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that some discourses with identical forms can actually be *distinct* genres. It has thus been argued that genre cannot be defined by formal characteristics (Fish). Others emphasize the need to recognize genres by the goals they accomplish, and by the discourse communities that define them (Wardle; Swales). So then, genre is best described as being a sort of interpretive framework, which is defined by a discourse community, in order to accomplish a particular rhetorical purpose.

The most foundational aspect of this discussion concerns what a genre *is*. Simply put, genres *are* interpretive frameworks. The phrase "interpretive framework" has been primarily treated by Stanley Fish in his text How to Recognize a Poem When You See One. In this article, Fish describes an experiment in which he instructed his poetry class to interpret a poem written on the blackboard. In *fact*, the "poem" was nothing more than an assignment list he had written for the previous class. Fish found that both classes drew very different meanings from the *same text* according to their pre-established method of interpretation (Fish). In other words, they saw in the "poem" exactly what they were predisposed to look for. This evidences an underlying structure of presuppositions which influences the very understanding of information taken in. These "interpretive frameworks" are the essential building blocks for communication within a community (Kent). In one sense, genres are not objective because each discourse community looks for different information, and yet in another sense, they are not entirely subjective because they are defined by the *community*, rather than by an individual. Therefore, "acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source," (Fish).

The practical aspect of this discussion concerns what a genre *does*. Since genres constitute the standards by which information is recognized, they are then the convention which allows people to communicate effectively with each other. Letters are a common example. While all letters share similar features (i.e. greeting, body, salutation etc.), the defining factor is not the form but rather

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the purpose of the letter. This is evident in the fact that there are many kinds, or subgenres, of letters. A business letter or an email for instance are suitable for different situations than a postcard might be. This means that genre must be identified by the contextual purpose which it was meant to fulfill. Elizabeth Wardle has conducted a case study to investigate this concept. She found that not only does one's use of genre in a given context determine one's communicative effectiveness within one's discourse community, but it also ultimately affects one's *identity* within the community (Wardle). This makes sense in light of Fish's model, since social acceptance/effectiveness would be indelibly linked to conformity with the appropriate interpretive framework as it is defined by the community (Fish). Therefore, the definition of genre must also hinge on its fulfillment of the rhetorical purpose it was created to satisfy.

The common thread of this discussion concerns where genre *comes from*. This subject already has been alluded to. Since genres are interpretive frameworks which fulfill a particular rhetorical purpose, they must be conventions of a discourse community which wants to accomplish that rhetorical purpose. It would be absurd to say that genres invent themselves. If Fish is correct, then genres must be invented by a preexisting communication-minded entity. Namely, genre is tethered to the concept of discourse communities and must be discussed in such terms. According to John Swales, "A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims," (Swales). It is quite astounding to note that the definitions of genre and discourse communities rely on the mutual reality of the other. Therefore, both concepts *must* be absolute standards for understanding communication. Many authors have acknowledged this notion, though not always explicitly (Hyland; Devitt; Wardle). Although this idea may seem counterintuitive, it is consistent with Biblical truth. According to the Bible, God created Adam with a fully functioning language, (see Genesis 2:15-17, 23; 3), and all people had the same language until the confusion at Babel (Genesis 11). Since, people are "created in the image of

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God," communication is a trait which must rely on the nature of God Himself. It makes sense then, that something which describes how communication takes place ultimately finds its roots in something which cannot be explained except by assuming that God has put all the codependent aspects of communication in place *simultaneously*.

Having considered how genre should be defined, the conversation is set to discuss a specific example of how interpretive frameworks, rhetorical purposes, and discourse communities are woven together. In order to see how these realities are applied in academic circles, it will be helpful to examine a particular genre, and to note how it demonstrates these characteristics.

Geological research articles are a good example of a how genre can be understood in the terms outlined above. The earth science community seeks to increase understanding of the earth, and to solve practical problems related to the earth and the environment. The genre of geological research articles has been created to further the communicative aims of the earth science community, and does so by providing a medium to present scientific findings, to suggest hypotheses, and to critique constructively other geological models. Although this genre is highly structured, the form alone cannot set it apart from other technical genres which have similar, even identical, format. The rigid structure is not the defining characteristic of the genre, but rather a consequence of attempting to accomplish the community's goals, which require a rigid and standardized way to present ideas. A genre analysis was conducted in order to better understand how this genre operates according to a dynamic definition. Henceforth are the findings of this study.

Earth scientists are primarily interested in scientific data and the logical conclusions which they can subsequently draw. Despite minor variations among publications, all geologic research articles have the same essential, logical components, and virtually never rely on emotionally geared arguments. "Abstracts," which succinctly summarize the text, are a unique feature of scholarly writing. Earth scientists can efficiently

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communicate and digest a significant amount of information by using concise abstracts. All parts of geological research articles, including the abstract, revolve around two major sections: one for presenting data, and the other for explaining it.

In researching this genre, the data portions were frequently found to account for more than half the total text. This is consistent with earth scientists' emphasis on basing their ideas in solid evidence. Therefore, presenting data accurately and effectively is an essential component of the genre. In fact, many geologists hold that presenting data is the most important part of geological writing. "It's most important to do a good job describing the data you have," says Dr. John Whitmore, geology professor and veteran in geologic writing. "If you do a good job of describing the data you have, it will be easier to make conclusions from that data," (Whitmore, 2012). This is one way in which this genres fulfills the rhetorical purpose of its associated community.

In geological research articles, it was also found that some sort of discussion and conclusions consistently followed the data section. In one paper studied, the data presented might not have been obviously significant. However, the second half of the paper went on to develop a new, comprehensive hypothesis to answer several intriguing geological dilemmas (Wise). This demonstrates an important point. The discussion sections of geological research articles are where the author contributes to the collective conversation by explaining how the data gathered is significant. This is where the ongoing conversations of geoscience live and thrive. Therefore, geological research articles accomplish the goals of the community.

The most effective examples of this genre share a highly precise use of vocabulary and technical terminology. Swales observation of discourse communities having a "specific lexis," certainly holds true in this case (Swales), as genres will always reflect the habits of their associated communities. For example, the abstract of one text begins with the line, "The timescale for the generation of granitic

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magmas and their subsequent intrusion, crystallization, and cooling as plutons is no longer incompatible with the biblical time frames of the global, year-long Flood cataclysm and of 6,000–7,000 years for earth history," (Snelling). This kind of jargon is not a defining requirement for the genre, but rather it reflects Snelling's attempt to precisely communicate with other earth scientists by using vocabulary they already understand. Solid geologic writing contains little to no ambiguity, even at the expense of brevity. This facilitates precise and effective communication within the earth science community's interpretive framework. This correlates directly with Wardle's research. An earth scientist who does not use the accepted conventional lexicon of the genre will not be easily understood nor will he be highly regarded by the community.

It should be clear that geological research articles are crafted in such a way as to facilitate the necessary exchange of information among the earth science community in a way that is easy for them to interpret. The sample text by John Whitmore is a good example of this exchange. "The Green River Formation: a large post-Flood lake system," (Whitmore, 2006) was actually one of several papers published in a forum debate between Whitmore and another scientist. The forum served as an opportunity to explore both hypotheses, and allowed the reader to make up his own mind about which hypothesis is better supported by the data. This is one way the community of earth science benefits from geologic research writing. As a result of the Green River Formation forum, many earth scientists now have a more complete view of earth history, a better understanding of how geologic features form, and have an improved approach to collecting and interpreting data.

Had someone from a very different discourse community read Whitmore's paper, perhaps a community of fiction writers for instance, they would not understand what Whitmore was trying to say. In fact, they would probably interpret the article as something like an allegory with all sorts of hidden meanings. Likewise, had the same information been presented in a fiction novel, earth

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scientists would never have understood that Whitmore was talking about a particular suite of rocks. Therefore, the genre must depend on the interpretive framework established by the community, rather than its exact characteristics.

This study of geological research articles verifies the conclusions of Swales, Wardle, Fish, and other genre theorists. The earth science community has defined a particular framework of interpretation in order to further their rhetorical purposes. Therefore, the findings of this genre analysis confirm the complex and dynamic model of genre theory, rather than a formal and static one.

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