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Genre Across The Curriculum

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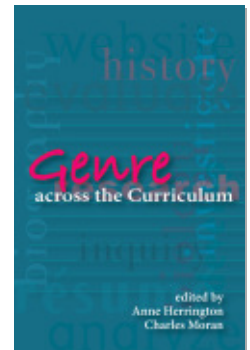
Published by Utah State University Press

Herrington, Anne and Charles Moran.

Genre Across The Curriculum.

Utah State University Press, 2005.

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WRITING HISTORY

Informed or Not by Genre Theory?

Anne Beaufort and John A. Williams

What is history writing? The answer to that question is complex. And equally complex is the question of how to help students become better writers of history. In this chapter, the two of us—a composition specialist and history professor—look from our respective vantage points at these questions. As we undertook this project, our aim was to further our collective thinking about what it means to teach and to learn the genres of a particular discipline, and in particular, what it means to try to design and execute effective writing assignments in undergraduate history classes to promote a deeper understanding of both the subject of history and the ways in which historians “write” that history.

We will begin with an overview of some of the particular challenges of defining, teaching, and learning the genres of history writing. Then we will briefly present two case studies—one of a history major’s limited progress in writing history genres over a three-year period at an elite, private university, and the other, in one history class at a large public university, of an experiment to refine a writing assignment, situating it more completely within the genres and discourse community of history.

MATERIAL CONDITIONS IN TEACHING HISTORY WRITING

In spite of the centrality of writing to the “doing” of history, teaching writing in undergraduate history courses is challenging. Courses may be part of general-education requirements and enrollments may be high. The subject matter to be grasped is extensive. Anne collected data at a private, elite university. The history major she followed—Tim—received little direct instruction in writing for history. Each course Tim took required writing, yet only one professor wrote more than an end comment and a few marginal comments on Tim’s essays. And the majority of comments focused on issues of content, an important aspect of writing, but not the sole aspect. The scarcity of teacher comments on Tim’s writing suggests the multiple demands on history professors’ time and the relatively low

priority of teaching the genres of history writing to undergraduate history majors. And as the case study will demonstrate, Tim made few improvements in his history essays from his freshman through junior years, the point at which he completed his history requirements and began pursuing his double major in engineering.

At John's institution some of the circumstances are similar. For at least the last thirty-five years, virtually all history courses have required written work. Few courses have ever used machine-graded "objective" examinations; blue book essay examinations have been all but universal. Nearly all courses have required written work as well. The assignments have ranged from book reviews to conventional term papers to reaction papers on issues raised in the course. This has been true of introductory surveys and more specialized thematic lecture courses. For senior majors, the department offers colloquia, with a seminar format, in which the course requirement is one lengthy research paper. Graduating history majors have to submit one of their papers, of at least ten pages, to certify fulfillment of the "major writing requirement," a campus requirement administered by departments.

This emphasis on writing is rare in the social science division of this institution, and the history department takes pride in it. Yet how effectively the department is teaching the genres of history writing is a question. In spring semester 2003, the department had extensive discussions about the major writing requirement and ways in which the department could make it more rigorous, less perfunctory. After discussion, the undergraduate committee decided that "expository and analytic papers are equally acceptable. Extensive research is not intrinsic to the requirement." These statements reflect the variety of assignments given and the great diversity of approaches to writing in the faculty and the profession at large. The revised major writing requirement guidelines called for papers to be submitted "well before the end of the semester," to allow for comments, revisions, and improvements. They also encouraged the use of smaller lecture courses with intensive writing components to fulfill the requirement, and questioned but did not forbid the use of larger lecture courses for this purpose. They also recommended a stricter enforcement of standards: a grade of B- had been acceptable; now it was noted that this grade should reflect the quality of writing, not simply the content of the paper.

In John's view, and in his colleagues' view, whatever the size of the course, a difficulty arises from the nature of undergraduate lecture courses in history. In laboratory science courses, and even in many sociology

and psychology courses, professors teach, say, what chemists do, or how to pursue the discipline. Yet history courses do not emphasize “what historians do” but rather the results of historical work, what conclusions historians have come to. Though this may be changing, the lectures typically offer an exposition or narrative of a historical field. Students receive, and expect to receive, a systematic survey, a body of information, about a field or theme of history. The greatest innovation of recent decades has been the introduction of new topics and themes, new bodies of synthesized information—women’s history, histories of ethnic and racial minorities, “history from the bottom up,” “the history of the inarticulate,” and the like. Criticisms of existing work and emphasis on interpretive debate are, of course, at the center of “what historians do,” but this aspect of historical work does not enter fully into undergraduate lecture courses.

What, then, of the “paper” assignments in courses defined by the historical material to be “covered”? Writing is “what historians do.” But the paper tends to be attached to the lecture course more to provide part of the grade than to teach skills of writing or of historical analysis. A minimum goal of such assignments seems to be to assign some outside reading and to prove that students have done it. Often due at the very end of the term, papers are written and graded sometimes without any feedback or consultation, nor do students always get papers back before the end of the semester to see comments.

The burden of the course is to present the subject in lecture form, with textbook or other supporting readings. Students study this material and write midterm and final examinations based on these. There is often little time spent on teaching the students the skills needed to write the paper—for example, helping students to understand the genre requirements of the assignment through explicit instruction and use of models, and so on, and helping students to develop the analytical frameworks they need to do the task. Teachers tacitly assume that students bring those skills in with them and complain when they do not.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINING THE GENRES IN HISTORY

When asked at the end of his senior year to describe the genres of history writing, Tim, the history major Anne followed, replied, “There’s so many different kinds of historical writing. . . . there’s the textbook, there’s the Shrewsbury type paper [referring to a particular primary source document], which just focuses on one little document and squeezes as much blood as it can out of that. . . . there’s the kind of typical history assignment

which would be something like one of the Islamic [papers] . . . take one of these writers or these books and discuss it in a certain context.”

We see in Tim’s reply a beginning understanding of varying purposes for writing in history and types of content in history writing, and with the mention of textbooks, an acknowledgement of length and structure of one type of history writing. When asked if he felt making an argument was essential to the success of a history essay, he said, “Yeah. Maybe not in those, umm, I guess I did here [referring to one of his assignments], but this [referring to another assignment] is more of a synthetic approach. This one doesn’t seem to be very argumentative. Here I say, ‘There lies a stark contrast.’ Okay, well, so what? I guess you’re kind of trying to make a point that your analysis is valid.” His hedges—“I guess I did . . . I guess you’re kind of trying to . . . yeah, maybe . . .”—suggest that Tim is not altogether certain what rhetorical purposes are common or expected in the discourse community.

But trying to define genres in history writing is difficult to do, as even experts in the field recognize. Tosh says: “Historical writing is characterized by a wide range of literary forms. . . . [T]his lack of clear guidelines is partly a reflection of the great diversity of the historian’s subject matter: there could not possibly be one literary form suited to the presentation of every aspect of the human past. But it is much more the result of the different and sometimes contradictory purposes behind historical writing, and above all of the tension which lies at the heart of all historical enquiry between the desire to re-create the past and urge to interpret it” (1984, 94–95).

John’s view of genres in history is similar to Tosh’s. In John’s view, the oldest model for the student history paper is the “term paper,” and students know how to write these assignments. They have a topic, and a few days before the paper is due they get several books on this topic open in front of them. (Of course, nowadays, they may well use Internet sources.) They move from book to book, paraphrasing, following the sentence and paragraph sequences of their sources. At its worst, the term paper is an exercise in looking up some information but has little value as writing. Students imitate the models they have—readings assigned in this or other courses. In addition, professors often say they want students to have “critical thinking” skills, but these are seldom defined or talked about. What historians mean by critical thinking is an awareness of historiographical issues, problems of interpretation, historical debates, and methods. But where will students get these skills? These matters are difficult to put

across in a survey lecture course, with its own burden of presenting a synthesis of knowledge about, say, the history of the United States or some theme within that field.

To make matters more difficult, historical writing is varied and rapidly changing. Methods, topic selection, and style of presentation are vigorously debated within the historical profession, and no single definition is acceptable to all. Philosophers and sociologists, among others, often claim that the discourse of professional historians is loose, lacking in rigor, with great inferential leaps between evidence and conclusions. But the more scientific and quantitative historians are criticized for not successfully conveying, through narrative, how reality was experienced in past societies, how it felt to be there. According to Weinstein, historical novelists such as Mary Lee Settle claim that they can portray the subjectivity of historical personages with greater authenticity than historians have been capable of. After all, that inferential leap into the feelings of past times is the historical novelist's stock in trade (1990, 11–19). Thus, history is hung between the humanities and social sciences, and its procedures and its values are contested, within the discipline and without. Part of the difficulty history teachers have in explaining to students what historical writing is all about stems from the problems of the discipline itself.

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES IN LEARNING TO WRITE HISTORY

The problem of learning to write in history is not just a matter of appropriating a particular form. Consider Slevin's definition of genre: "Genre is a received form, part of a cultural code, that synthesizes discursive features (e.g. subject matter, meaning, organization, style, and relations between writer and implied/actual audience) in recognizable ways" (1988, 4). Issues of subject matter and meaning are embedded, as Slevin indicates, within cultural codes. Genres, or the individual texts a historian writes, do not exist alone, as single points of communication. Rather, genres are a part of a whole activity system, a discourse community of historians who pursue writing projects as part of ongoing conversations on the meaning of the past.

So an equally challenging task for history teachers, if they want to introduce students to the genres of history writing, is guiding students to tasks appropriate to the discourse community in which history genres are situated. Wineburg (1991a) has pointed out that the historian must find not only a subject, but a problem to be solved through the writing project. He states, "Historical inquiry differs considerably from problem

solving in well-structured domains. . . . in history goals remain vague and indefinite, open to a great deal of personal interpretation” (73–74). The teacher who discusses these issues of what “counts” as a worthy topic in the discourse community of historians with his or her students will at the same time be furthering their chances of taking on a subject matter and an authentic rhetorical purpose in their essays that not only meets genre expectations in history, but also invites apprenticeship-like participation in the discourse community of historians (Lave and Wenger 1991).

How to structure a historical essay is not straightforward or formulaic, either. In one student guidebook for writing history, the author (Storey 1999) advises using one of two types of structure—either a narrative with analysis embedded, or an analysis with narrative embedded. Stockton (1995), a rhetorician, also found different expectations when she analyzed teachers’ instructions and grading practices in history courses. One history teacher in Stockton’s study stated her expectations—that students should write essays that made arguments—but in fact gave As to papers that were chronologically structured, with the argument embedded in the narrative, and lower grades to expository essays that make the explicit argument the top-level structure of the essay.

In addition to appropriate subject matter and structure, Slevin’s definition of genre also highlights matters of style or linguistic features. What historical vocabulary should one use in order to speak with authority? And what person should be used in a historical essay—omniscient third person? Second person? On occasion, first person singular or first person plural? According to Stockton, historians establish the credibility of their reports, in part, by writing in an “autonomous voice capable of telling time . . . not subject to history, not entangled in self-doubt, self-reference, or the webs of discourse” (69). Can student writers be taught the appropriate vocabulary, and the appropriate authorial voice for history writing, not as a superficial overlay onto weak content, but as part of a multipronged approach to learning the genres of history writing? That is part of the challenge of mastering history genres.

In addition to being cognizant of genre knowledge students must gain, history teachers can benefit from an awareness of related developmental processes for history students in both reading and critical thinking. Reading skills are crucial to writing successful historical essays, as the primary rhetorical task is the interpretation of texts. A variety of critical thinking activities might be associated with reading-to-write tasks: for example, recall, synthesis, analysis, and/or classification. In addition,

besides assimilating and manipulating information from source texts, the skilled reader/writer draws upon rhetorical and lexical knowledge to discern issues of bias, tone, and author credibility. Historians must deconstruct texts for their reliability (both internal validity and corroboration with other sources) and rhetorical features (Britt et al. 1994; Greene 1993; Paxton 1999). They must also synthesize texts, doing associative, comparative thinking to provide as multidimensional a perspective on events as possible (Bohan and Davis 1998; Greene 1993; Leinhardt and Young 1996; Wineburg 1991b).

Wineburg's (1991a) comparative study of students' (high school seniors) versus historians' reading of historical source documents points out the advantages of teaching students to read history texts through a genre lens: historians looked at source information, corroborated one text with another, and contextualized events in time and space—all part of understanding the inherent meanings of genres in history writing. Students, on the other hand, failed “to see text as a social instrument masterfully crafted to achieve a social end” (Wineburg 1991b, 502). Leinhardt and Young also studied key reading strategies of expert historians and found that historians “tended to maximize, uncovering the richest network of information available from the text, ever suspect of possible discrepancies or dualities.” In contrast to these behaviors, they found “for the average reader, what happens in the text is normally seen as what happens in the story” (478). These differences in reading strategies—novice versus expert—are in part differences of understanding both the nature of historical texts in general (compared, say, to literary texts or scientific texts) and the understanding the genre features of a wide variety of historical records—letters, public documents, newspaper accounts, memoirs, oral histories, and so on.

Besides astute reading of historical texts and understanding the discourse community and genre conventions in history, to write history requires the critical thinking skills of synthesizing information and constructing historical arguments. Students transitioning from high school to college often find that college demands more than summarizing others' texts or reporting facts. The most typical type of historical reasoning is causal reasoning: “Because of X and Y, then Z.” Such reasoning requires extensive background knowledge, close reading of source documents, the ability to see not isolated facts, but rather, institutional and structural factors that affect events (Hallden 1994; Wineburg 2001). Additionally, historical reasoning requires the ability to see multidimensional, com-

plex perspectives (Bohan and Davis 1998) and to understand how these analyses are woven into the rhetorical purposes, forms, and so on of the genres of history writing. As Watts states, “[H]istory is a subject in which it is difficult to assemble all the evidence, difficult to have conclusive proof, and yet easy to find, from the vast range of material, rival evidence of a different argument” (1972, 38). Several studies of high school or college history students wrestling with the critical thinking skills involved in synthesizing evidence and constructing arguments have demonstrated this skill is not one college students necessarily have mastery of (Greene 1993; Hallden 1994; Langer 1984; Wineburg 1994, 2001; Young and Leinhardt 1998). Students frequently resort to easier cognitive tasks, such as summary, rather than analysis or argument.

But these learning goals are entirely attainable. Within a general framework of understanding genres’ roles in the disciplinary field of history, the critical thinking and argumentative skills needed will likely become clearer to students as they see the genres’ purposes within the discourse communities the genres are a part of.

A LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDY

A longitudinal study of Tim’s undergraduate’s work in six history courses, from freshman through junior years, demonstrates the importance of devoting at least a small portion of class time to explicit disciplinary writing instruction, ideally from a genre perspective. This was apparently not the case in Tim’s experience, and as the analysis of his writing will show, Tim did not increase his writing skills in the genres of history in any consistent and significant ways over the course of his undergraduate history studies as far as I could see. I report here a small portion of the analysis of his work in history over a three-year period (Beaufort forthcoming).

The case study of Tim was part of a larger longitudinal study of five college writers across the four years of undergraduate work. Tim volunteered to be part of the study, as he had a keen interest in writing. I did not have a complete data set: Tim brought me only the written work he could readily lay his hands on. Time constraints also prohibited me from observing Tim’s history classes and interviewing his teachers. Nonetheless, I was able to interview Tim extensively in his freshman, sophomore, and senior years as well as two years after he left college to discuss his work in history. In all, he brought twelve papers to me, written across his freshman, sophomore, and junior years. Interviews were discourse-based—that is, Tim was prompted to explain his thinking processes, his decisions about

each text, and the context of the courses in which the essays were written. In order to triangulate my analysis of his written work, I also interviewed several historians with expertise in the subject areas Tim was writing in to place his work within the larger context of the discourse community of historians and determine how closely he was approximating the work of historians.

As I indicated at the beginning of the chapter, in a retrospective interview at the end of his senior year, Tim reflected back on the writing he had done in history and was not able to articulate very clearly what genre expectations his professors had. Was it necessary to make an argument in a historical essay? What was the purpose of a close reading of primary or secondary texts? Looking at the different aspects of Tim's essays through the lens of genre reveals a number of problems in Tim's writing as a result of his having only vague awareness of genre expectations in history. Whether his professors made those expectations clear or not can only be surmised, but Tim could recall no explicit instructions about writing in genres in history. The problems that resulted from this genre confusion were numerous.

The first genre-related problem Tim faced was choosing an appropriate content or appropriate rhetorical purpose for an essay—if he was given the latitude to do so. Tim reported that he sometimes felt the only purpose of a writing assignment was to regurgitate a particular historical interpretation the professor advocated and to demonstrate that one had read the assigned materials. Of the writing task in one class his freshman year he said, “[The professor] would say you came to the wrong [conclusion]. . . . We talked about it afterwards. I walked him through my chain of thought and he followed it up to the very last link. . . . in order to get the grade on the paper . . . you had to say what you'd been told in class about the book. Maybe in a new way, maybe in more depth, but basically say the same thing.”

In other writing assignments, Tim felt he had more latitude in terms of the type of topic he chose and the rhetorical purpose for the essay. But that latitude on writing assignments did not necessarily lead to writing that was appropriate to the discourse community. Perhaps his professors were thinking only in terms of getting students to read, not crafting their assignments to initiate students into genres of the discourse community of historians. But as this volume argues, the latter is a reasonable and attainable goal. One of Tim's essays in his first year was a comparison of Augustine's *Confessions* and Benedictine's *Rule*. He tried to argue their

differences based on changing political conditions in the Roman Empire that transpired across the time period when each was written. A medievalist I asked to review Tim's essay for its fit within the discourse community of historians pointed out that the single major cause of the differences in the two texts was in fact that the texts were different genres. Augustine was writing a memoir, *Benedictine*, a guidebook for communal living. So Tim's essay took up a moot point. Tim had failed to consider the genres he was analyzing, which in turn led to an inadequate interpretation of the differences between the texts. If his professor had given some guidance about a framework for analysis of the two texts, Tim's analysis could have been more appropriate. This instance reiterates the importance of genre knowledge in history, not just for the sake of producing texts, but also for the sake of reading and interpreting a range of genres appropriately.

For an American history course his sophomore year, Tim's criticism of a historian's analysis of the causes of the Salem witchcraft trials again failed to take up a question that historians would consider relevant to the text under consideration: the author of the text Tim was analyzing was not concerned with the question Tim raised, so in essence, he was not evaluating the text on its own terms. In another essay for the same course, Tim attempted a rhetorical analysis of a letter from one Seventh-Day Baptist church in New Jersey to another in Rhode Island in the eighteenth century. Tim was able to enumerate many of the text's rhetorical features, this time considering carefully the genre of the text, the social context of the text, and the particular craft employed by the text's authors. But Tim's essay became a catalogue of rhetorical features without having an overall point. As an Americanist who read Tim's essay pointed out, it failed to answer the "So what?" question. Tim's understanding of the assignment was to "[focus] on one little document and squeezes as much blood as [I] can out of that." Based on what he produced and my interviews with him, Tim was not clear about the rhetorical purpose of the textual analysis, and as a result, his essay was less than successful in fulfilling expectations of the genre.

This crucial aspect of genre knowledge is often overlooked. To be effective rhetorically and fulfill readers' expectations of a genre, the subject matter of a particular text needs to link up with the "ongoing conversations" of the discipline (Bruffee 1984), and an appropriate framework of analysis must be used. Tim reported that a few times in his freshman year he ran an essay topic by the TA for the course. But Tim reported that assignments were generally open-ended, and in Tim's case, these

open-ended assignments often resulted in choosing inappropriate content for his essays. Nor was Tim given guidance on appropriate analytical frameworks with which to generate the content of his essays.

Besides problems with content and rhetorical purpose in Tim's history essays, there were problems with executing a particular rhetorical purpose with ample development of ideas and with the aid of a structure that followed a clear line of argument. Of the twelve history essays Tim shared with me, all of which were five to seven pages long, an analysis of discourse-level structures revealed that only three of the twelve had a cohesive structure and only four had strong support for claims. And the strongest essays were not consistently the ones written in his junior year. A few of Tim's essays were a loose list of events or factors without any organizing thesis; in other essays the thesis was not substantiated in the body of the essay with concrete evidence. One of his professors commented on one unsuccessful essay, "Your hypothesis is interesting and sophisticated. The logic with which you apply it to the readings is sometimes faulty."

Tim attempted some complex structures in a few essays—a comparison of sources interwoven with a cause-effect argument, for example, or a chronology and a cause-effect argument woven together. He demonstrated a beginning understanding of the need, in history genres, not just to amass facts, but to incorporate textual evidence into a carefully constructed argument. But more often, he organized his essays as a list of points without clear interconnections among points. Even when he was doing the analytical work of comparing different historical documents, often there was no overarching central point to the essay. Although this is in part a critical thinking issue, it is crucial as well for fulfilling the persuasive aims of most history writing.

Patterns of citation usage, another indication of ability to work successfully analyzing historical documents (Greene 1993, 2001), were also irregular. In some instances, he gave citations for material that could be considered common knowledge. In three essays there were no citations. And in the two essays with the highest number of citations, there were citations for single facts but whole paragraphs of paraphrased material with no citations.

Matters of linguistic style were also a part of what Tim needed to learn as a novice writer in history. In retrospective interviews, he was able to articulate to me the difficulty of finding the appropriate authorial stance in writing his history essays: "[S]aying 'I' felt like, they are going to investigate my credentials [*laughs*]. I'd rather just hide behind the ideas and

let them present themselves . . . saying ‘I’ would be like, well, who is this guy, anyway? Well, he’s a student. I mean, come on, what does he know? So ‘we’ is little vague. You can hide behind it, I guess.”

Tim experimented with authorial stances. In one essay he wrote, “Although only complete knowledge of Fletcher’s character and values can explain his impressions conclusively, *we* can suggest a simple reason.” In another essay, he wrote, “From both writers’ perspectives *the reader sees that*.” He also felt that historians wrote in more formal prose than, say, his English professor might expect, although an analysis of the lexicon he used in his essays did not demonstrate a particularly “advanced” or sophisticated use of historical concepts and phraseology. Rather, he frequently employed colloquialisms and word puns (he enjoyed word play) that would not be appropriate to written discourse in history.

These problems—a combination of issues in critical thinking, subject matter knowledge, rhetorical skill, ability to structure material, and ability to assume an appropriate ethos in relation to his audience—all led to essays that were less than they could have been from the standpoint of appropriating not only the textual features of genres in history, but also the social roles enacted by those genres. Yet in spite of these indications of Tim’s being still a novice in handling the genres of history writing even at the end of his junior year, Tim was successful in negotiating the expectations of his professors for his writing. Tim received As from his professors on the majority of his essays. Comments at the end of essays included “Good synthesis”; “Good analysis”; “Creative approach.”

Tim’s comments to me in interviews about his reasons for choosing the particular topics he did for his essays revealed that he was an independent thinker who cared about finding his own particular angle on historical situations. His professors, from the few comments written on his papers, appeared to value this independence of thinking and, as was the case in John’s analysis of his own grading practices, did not assign grades based on a clear set of genre expectations other than these: that essays should analyze historical texts and incorporate textual evidence as support for arguments.

In addition, in analyzing the papers, it is evident that there was no clear “progression” from his freshman through junior years in incorporating more and more of the features of historical writing. It is also interesting that the writing assignments were not progressively more difficult, except for a requirement in one of his junior-level courses for a longer essay (fifteen to twenty pages). And outside readers in history whom I consulted

judged many of his essays outside the realm of what historians would write. It is worth pondering whether, had genre knowledge been a clear learning objective in these courses, Tim's history writing skills would have developed further and enabled him to participate more authentically in the discourse community of historians. We turn now to a case of a professor consciously trying to help his students acquire the genre knowledge they will need to write effectively in his course.

JOHN'S GENRE EXPERIMENT

When I come to make a paper assignment for a lecture course, I have keenly felt many of the problems discussed in the literature on students learning to read and write history. I typically have a class of sixty to ninety students, in a junior-level course on South African or British Indian history. The historical material is unfamiliar to most students, and I need to spend most of the time establishing a framework of information.

But I want the students to write a historical essay, and I want to work out an assignment that will be difficult to plagiarize, where even the paraphrasing of secondary sources will not work. I believe that the classic research paper is not a practical option here; for that kind of paper I would want a seminar format so that I could lead students step-by-step through the research process. Here, I have not been worried about whether the students will be writing *history* but only that they will be thinking, casting their own sentences, doing the task themselves. Therefore, I tell them the assignment is not a term paper but an essay. This makes students stop to ask questions. They know what a "term paper" is, but what is an "essay"?

In effect, this assignment, which I have used for a number of years, invokes the issue of genre. My purposes in calling for an essay were two: first, to de-familiarize the assignment so that students might listen more closely to instructions; second, beyond this, to move students away from the term paper model in which they so often simply paraphrased sources. I wanted to say to them, "No one since creation has done this assignment; you are on your own." But my use of genre was akin to Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme*, who realized suddenly that he was speaking prose.

Working with Anne in spring 2003 and learning about the newer, more flexible concepts of genre, I set out to make the question of genre more explicit and purposeful, to see whether we could improve student writing by giving detailed instructions. One of the things Anne noticed in looking at an earlier set of papers based on a similar assignment was

that there seemed to be no consistency to the grades from her point of view. Good grades were given sometimes for the quality of expression, sometimes for the body of information, sometimes for the way the information was analyzed. In some cases it seemed altogether subjective. I realized that in some cases I rewarded engagement, effort, commitment to the assignment. I wanted to encourage students to take risks rather than settling for the easiest, safest approach to the assignment. Poorly written papers reflecting this commitment might not be graded as low as their quality seemed to merit. My expectations had not been clear enough, even to myself, and therefore the grading criteria were difficult to define. Introducing issues of genre would make expectations clear and grading easier.

In our spring semester 2003 experiment in the use of genre, the assignment for the paper was an outgrowth of ones used before. In previous assignments I had been most concerned about forestalling plagiarism. My method was to have students confront two books that were dis-coordinated, with no easy connection between them. It was a gimmick, designed to prevent cheating. Now I had a more positive goal—to make an effective writing assignment. Now I asked students to frame a hypothesis and an argument—this was new. It raised questions of critical reading that I have still to explore further. The assignment is not just about writing, but also about how to read: not passively for information but actively for responses and with a critical sense informed by some disciplinary knowledge.

The paper would cover material from the end of the course in South African history, the period from 1962 to 1994—the years of apartheid, the armed struggle, the transition, and the emergence of the new South Africa. The readings drew the students away from the political struggle itself to the lives of South Africans living through it, some of them important historical actors, others ordinary people, of all races, living through these dramatic times. All students were to read two books in common: Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1999) and David Goodman's *Fault Lines* (1999). In addition, each student was to read one more book, selected from a list of three dozen works—novels, memoirs, or journalism covering the same general topics. Krog's book is a multilayered work of journalism. It gives an account of her personal experience in covering the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and it provides a rich commentary on and analysis of the commission itself. In addition, it reflects on the author's own identity as an Afrikaner in the new circumstances of South African society. David Goodman's book provides a series

of short biographical sketches in pairs—for example, of the activist Frank Chikane and the policeman, Paul Erasmus, who hounded him. David Goodman, an American journalist, had visited South Africa during the years of apartheid. This book is the result of a second visit. It is in effect a work of contemporary history, describing and assessing the realities of the “new South Africa.” Whatever third book the student might choose, whether by Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, or someone else, would offer an additional source of information and a further point of view.

Anne suggested that laying out specific criteria for grading was a good way to define the nature of the paper. I handed out the following to the class after the midterm examination, when they were starting work on the papers:

- Bases for grading the paper:
- Clear statement of argument, hypothesis, or purpose of the paper. What will your paper accomplish?
- Effective use of evidence drawn from the reading to support your points. This involves selecting key bits of evidence, not summarizing entire sections of the reading.
- Logical sequence of unified paragraphs to make your points and develop your argument. Is your argument accessible and easy to follow?
- Standard written English spelling and grammar.
- Historical concepts defined and used appropriately.
- Success of the body of the paper in supporting the argument or establishing the hypothesis.

With these guidelines, the students’ task was to read three books, working out a way to respond to them. As noted above, they needed a statement of their hypothesis. I wanted them to decide what to say, construct an argument, cast their own sentences and paragraphs—in short, to write an original paper.

They were anxious. Many of them begged for a “topic.” This would clearly carry them back to the “term paper” model. I pointed out in class that the hypothesis they developed would give them a principle of selection. They were going to have to omit at least 98 percent of the material they read in the books, and they would need good reasons for their decisions to include or omit material. What they included could not be arbitrary or random but had to be directly germane to their stated purpose.

I judge the results of this experiment in using a genre approach to teaching writing in history to be mixed. It turned out to be disappointing

in some ways but with some significant successes. As the history department guidelines on the writing requirement have noted, large classes are not the best forum for giving instruction in writing. Yet we are probably stuck with them. Over the years, enrollment has edged up in our junior-level classes. The South African history course fulfils a diversified education requirement and is taken by many nonhistory majors. Also, attendance was a problem. Students cutting class on given days did not receive the handout or hear the class discussions of the assignment.

Some students simply evaded the assignment and found easier, more familiar paths. Some, for example, wrote a summary history of South Africa since 1652, reaching the time period covered in the assigned reading only in the last two pages of the paper. These papers mentioned the reading perfunctorily or, in a few cases, not at all. Other papers reverted to a “term paper” model, giving an expository account of the transition from apartheid to the new South Africa, drawn more from the classes and textbook than from the assigned reading for the paper. More papers recounted selected stories from the books, uncritically, with no evaluation of their own; these were close to the assignment but for their lack of any hypothesis or argument. One or two papers were statements of personal outrage—an element that could be used very effectively if the paper also addressed the material assigned.

The best single paper failed to follow the assignment in another way. It was thirty pages long, triple the suggested length. This paper selected long quotations from Antjie Krog’s, David Goodman’s, and Desmond Tutu’s books, juxtaposing them and subjecting them to perceptive analysis and evaluation. The success of this paper at first made me wonder whether the ten-page length was fully adequate to fulfil the assignment effectively.

In the end, though, a number of the nine- to twelve-page papers met the assignment very effectively. It was a relief—I did not want to read ninety article-length papers. I can conclude from the fair number of successful papers that the assignment, with its emphasis on genre, did help some students write better and more convincing papers. The key elements for the most successful papers were an explicit hypothesis and an argument in support of it. As noted above, the hypothesis provides a principle of selection by which quotations and factual details can be included or left out.

Several papers addressed the question of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the controversial decision to offer amnesty in exchange

for truth rather than seeking retributive justice through criminal trials. Here was fertile ground for speculation and argument. Whether the TRC should have attempted prosecutions for gross human rights violations was a matter the students would have opinions about. The authors they were reading also debated this question, and so did the people of South Africa whose lives these authors were writing about. This argument was the most obvious opportunity for hypothesizing; I wanted to see how many students would frame a hypothesis around this issue. In the end, only a few did. Students needed more training in thinking critically about the texts—a lesson I will note for future classes. On one level, these works of journalism are secondary authorities for the contemporary history of South Africa; on another, they are primary sources depicting the struggle individuals have with identities and moral commitments in a society undergoing deep and sudden changes. For students to get past the simplest level of engagement with the text—the summary—they need to engage more deeply than most did. They also need more training in how historians deal with such complex texts.

A series of topic sentences from one of the papers shows how a hypothesis could be used to sustain a paper. The paper asserts that all South Africans were victims of apartheid in one way or another and that the TRC offered a way to heal the society:

- “The system of apartheid has damaged not only black Africans, who felt it the most, but also Afrikaners, the very same ethnic group that institutionalized it.”
- “Perhaps the deepest wound to black people under apartheid was psychological.”
- “Mandela speaks in his autobiography about the inferiority complex among blacks as the greatest barrier to liberation.”
- “The domination of the police force by Afrikaners further ensured them a psychological hold over blacks through the use of fear and violence.”
- “In post-apartheid South Africa, many victims of apartheid crimes and their families still have not found psychological peace.”
- “A key part of reconstructing black African culture was correcting history.”
- “Apartheid made whites into drones, denying them the opportunity to think for themselves.”
- “Separation, the very meaning of apartheid, bred racist theories because it denied whites interaction with blacks and other ethnic groups.”

This unified structure enables the paper to carry well-selected and clear examples from the reading. The first topic sentence conveys the

hypothesis. The second through sixth sentences introduce sections on the impact of apartheid on the African population; the seventh and eighth deal with the whites. In this paper, each of the generalizations introduces expository sections providing supporting evidence. The vast amount of evidence available, which overwhelmed some students, provided here a storehouse to enrich this paper. This was possible, I believe, because of its strong and explicit hypothesis.

Two other successful papers focused on women in the struggle against apartheid. This theme allowed students to draw widely from the reading, though these papers missed the opportunity to talk about Antjie Krog, the author of one of the books they were reading. They tended to use the books as windows on reality, failing to consider that Antjie Krog was part of that reality and the publication of her book a historical event itself. Although the papers missed many such good opportunities to make deeper connections, they did accomplish some good analysis. One paper in particular documented the pressures apartheid placed on African families and recounted examples of women who were destroyed and women who were made stronger by the struggle. The theme of women got these papers beyond the simple recounting of a few anecdotes. Neither of these papers developed a strong hypothesis, but they were halfway there.

In the end, a few papers, eight or ten out of ninety, give me some satisfaction that the assignment did have its element of success. I do not have any evidence of before and after to measure how these particular students might have improved. It is not unusual to get about this many “good papers” in a class. But what made them “good” was less specific. In this class, the “good papers” stood out precisely because they were engaged in the genre specifications set out in the assignment.

The task here is to define the historical essay in contrast to the term paper students are familiar with and to get students to take control of the paper, rather than following the authorities by paraphrasing. Papers that are extended paraphrases of secondary sources in narrative or expository form are evading this goal. This semester’s experiment has pushed me to think further about the characteristics of the historical essay:

- It is a response to reading.
- As a response, it may have a personal element.
- It is critical, which does not mean attacking the work (“poorly written,” etc.) but rather assessing its characteristics.
- It has a hypothesis and makes an argument.

- Its use of historical evidence and information is subordinate and supports the argument.
- It is multilayered, concerned alike with the content of the books students are reading, the points of view of the authors, the impact of the books on an audience, and the books' literary qualities.

The emphasis on genre in this semester's experiment also provided a basis for more consistent grading. The clearer expectations set down made the papers easier to grade, as the students and the grader shared a list of criteria for grading. The result was slightly lower grades for students who evaded the assignment, more consistent grades, and easier coordination with the teaching assistant who graded some of the papers.

I have said that some students evaded the assignment. That is true, but taken too far such an accusation is like blaming the victim. Many students simply needed more direction, closer supervision. The ideal would be the essay on assigned readings that Oxford students read to their tutors each week, as Eric Foner (2002) describes it in *Who Owns History?* But here we have one essay in a semester, in a class with perhaps ninety students.

Why did some students, despite the handouts and several reinforcing class discussion, evade the assignments? Students did cut classes, and some undoubtedly missed the class discussions of the assignments. A colleague who teaches writing at another institution offered another reason: he said that once students are by themselves, late at night with the paper due the next day, they are simply looking for a way forward—like a tennis player who has just taken a lesson but cannot apply what he has learned in his next match.

I plan to continue working to improve the writing components of my courses along these lines: closer definition of the assignment in terms of genre will certainly help. I will assign some short drafts early in the semester. In these, students can learn to develop a hypothesis, practice critical assessments of readings, and frame some arguments—all aspects of the historical essays I want them to write. To provide a model for these short assignments, I want to point out some of these features in the historical works they are reading, to discuss historical writing rather than content only. Finally, these written exercises will make it clearer that working on writing will help their grades. It will help the class get away from the “make-or-break” nature of the one paper handed in on the last day of the class.

For many reasons, the experiment in genre was worth doing, and worth repeating and developing in the future.

IN CONCLUSION

What have we learned? First, that the concept of genre and genre theory have been useful frameworks for our dialogue, deepening our understanding of what was going on in the two writing situations we encountered. History departments have always taught writing, but now they are discussing it more and are more concerned with how it is done. Still, we suspect that few history professors are familiar with the body of scholarship on genre theory and its application to writing pedagogy cited in this chapter and throughout this book. Perhaps they should be, for it addresses the very problems they have been discussing. We were impressed with the convergence between the historians talking about writing and the writing researchers looking at the problems of student history writing. Both looked at the diversity of historical writing, the way complex problems of interpretation intrude so quickly, even on the undergraduate level. Genre as a theoretical framework is neither too amorphous nor too ideological. It can be applied, practically, to designing writing assignments, conceptualizing instruction for novice writers, and evaluating writing.

Second, though genre theory is readily grasped by any academic, knowledge of genre theory as manifest in one's own discipline may well be tacit knowledge, a type of knowing hard to articulate when working with student writers. Anne, an outsider to the discipline, took the role of eliciting from John what the issues are in writing in genres appropriate to the discipline of history. And John, through the process of that articulation, made "real" the genre knowledge he had. The need to make expectations for student writing more clear and explicit came up in both Tim's case and John's class. The tacitly held conventions of historical discourse, and the difficulty of articulating them for students, lies at the center of this problem of expectations. John noticed a similarity, too, between the experiences Tim had (in Anne's case study), including the inconsistent pedagogy of some of Tim's professors, and his own experience with grading papers. While genre theory is not a panacea, these problems of pedagogy and evaluation can also be ameliorated by clearer articulation of the genres students should learn and a well thought-out pedagogy to teach those genres.

Third, genre theory forces us to ask ourselves if we aren't creating artificial barriers in our minds when we say, in subject areas outside writing and rhetoric, that we don't or can't teach writing. Certainly, in history, the real work of the discipline is reading and interpreting texts in writing.

And genre expectations in history—comparing textual sources, interpreting the contexts for those documents, creating reasonable interpretive arguments based on textual evidence—in fact describe the very work at the heart of the discipline. Genres really are the vehicles of social action for those in the discourse community with which the genres are associated. Tim was “doing” history in his more successful essays, as were the students in John’s class who wrote the most successful essays. Less successful writing attempts missed the mark not just in some communicative sense, but in the sense of doing the analytical work of the discipline. So teaching history writing is in fact teaching history. Genre theory helps to make this evident. It would be interesting to hear from other disciplines: to what extent are the genres of the discipline at least in part “doing” the work of the discipline? And how are we teaching the mental habits, the philosophical assumptions, the practical activities of our fields as we instruct students in their writing? This is the real stuff of genre theory—and genres—in action.