

Writing Choices: Genre and Audience Expectations

Goals:

- Reinforce the connection between genre conventions and reader expectations and how meeting these expectations leads to effective writing
- Challenge the idea that genre conventions are rigid and inflexible
- Introduce choice and flexibility into this paradigm by testing the limits of genre conventions – can we disrupt readers’ expectations while still producing effective writing?
- Theme/DEI goal: understand how writer’s choices can be a powerful means of de-centering dominant ways of knowing

Previous work / context:

- Read selections from Hyland’s article “Genre and Academic Writing in the Disciplines” in tandem with looking at surface features of articles in different genres to establish the concept that readers have different expectations based on disciplinary values – these values lead to conventions¹
- For this class, read Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*” from *Braiding Sweetgrass* and a short bio from her website

Speedround Warm-up:

Directions: shout out what this is as soon as you recognize it

Sample 1

Chocolate Chip Cookies²

Ingredients

- 2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar

¹ Based on Katherine Schaefer’s workshop presented at WRTG 571

² From Very Best Baking. (n.d.). Original Nestle Tollhouse Chocolate Chip Cookies.

<https://www.verybestbaking.com/toll-house/recipes/original-nestle-toll-house-chocolate-chip-cookies/>.

- 3/4 cup packed brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups (12-ounce package) NESTLÉ® TOLL HOUSE® Semi-Sweet Chocolate Morsels
- 1 cup chopped nuts (Optional. If omitting, add 1 to 2 Tbsp. of all-purpose flour.)

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 375
2. Combine flour, baking soda and salt in small bowl. Beat butter, granulated sugar, brown sugar and vanilla extract in large mixer bowl until creamy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Gradually beat in flour mixture. Stir in morsels and nuts. Drop by rounded tablespoon onto ungreased baking sheets.
3. Bake for 9 to 11 minutes or until golden brown. Cool on baking sheets for 2 minutes; remove to wire racks to cool completely.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did you know what this is? What specific features does this have?
 - a. Instructor: ask prompting questions as needed, such as asking how the directions are presented (chronologically). Presentation of ingredients vs directions. Tie this to genre conventions
2. What is the purpose of a recipe?
3. Who is the audience this recipe is intended for? How do you know?
 - a. Instructor: American home cook. Simple directions. Basic ingredients
4. Do you think this recipe achieves its purpose? In other words, will a home cook be able to make delicious cookies with this recipe?
 - a. Instructor: achieves its purpose = effective writing. Connect to audience expectations and genre conventions

Sample 2

Directions: shout out what this is as soon as you recognize it

1. Beat the eggs.
2. Before you beat the eggs, make sure you warm them to room temperature. There should be 2 eggs.
3. Add flour.

4. Before you add the flour, beat in sugar, butter, and vanilla.
5. Don't forget spices!
6. Bake.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did you know what this is? What specific features does this have?
 - a. Instructor: generally students can still recognize this as a recipe but immediately see it's problematic. Point out that we should assume that this recipe has the same purpose and audience as the first one.
2. Do you think this recipe achieves its purpose? In other words, will a home cook be able to make delicious cookies with this recipe?
 - a. Instructor: Why not? What's the problem with this recipe? General answers tend to include a discussion of the previous features (ingredient list, chronological order, etc.) and how this is lacking. Connect this back to genre conventions and audience expectations and how this doesn't fulfill our expectations and likely won't achieve its purpose = ineffective writing.

Surface Features of Kimmerer

Directions: skim through (1-2 mins) and note the headings – what does this chapter look like, on the surface?

- General answers = scientific article because the headings (introduction, lit review, hypothesis, methods, results, discussion, conclusion, acknowledgments, references) all fit into scientific technical writing

Show the book. What else does this look like?

- Nonfiction book about nature

Overarching questions: What is this genre of writing? What is Kimmerer's purpose? Who is her audience? (we don't answer these now, we come back to them at the end)

Brief Class Discussion (5-7 mins):

- What do we expect to find in each section of a scientific article?

Group Work

- Split them into groups so each one works on a major section of the article

- We use a scientific article as a baseline for comparison
- I model my expectations for an intro of a scientific article and then describe what I see instead:
 - Narrative, almost poetic, no technical or scientific language – not sure what’s happening yet but it does draw me in
- Depending on timing, repeat for references or elicit their responses for references
- They work in groups sometimes in a Google Doc and sometimes on a whiteboard (pros and cons to each) recording their expectations vs what they found. I walk around, prompting them to be specific and see if the text somewhat fulfills expectations or if it’s wholly different

Class Discussion:

- Walk us through what you found? Were there features that were expected?
- What is Kimmerer doing with genre? Why? Do you find this effective?

Writer Reflection: How might you use this understanding of genre conventions and reader expectations and, possibly, thoughtfully breaking them in your own writing? Are there specific types of writing where you think you won’t be able to do this?

Takeaways:

- Students like rules, so they can embrace the idea of genre conventions and audience expectations as a rule and only see the limits to their choices
- By using a great piece of writing for this activity, students can see that breaking reader expectations can also be really effective.
- You have to understand genre conventions to break them
- I’ve used a similar framework to discuss writer’s voice and tone, later in the semester
- Also important to note limits – reminder of Hyland’s continuum of academic knowledge (p. 550). The sciences are more rigid in their genre conventions
- Can be a foundation for talking about multimodal projects – that’s a writing situation where students have control over the audience and purpose and so can play more.