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# A Framework for Teaching Writing

An Introduction to Genre Analysis



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## Introduction

Just as film and music have different genres, each with its own characteristics, so does writing. In the same way that a young film director might study the camerawork, sound, editing and storyline that are characteristic of horror films, an ESL student should be aware of the content, layout, style and register of a cover letter before attempting to write one. Genres are culturally determined and if a writer does not adhere to the characteristics of a particular genre, he/she will not be able to communicate effectively with members of that culture and may bring on feelings in their reader ranging from indifference to offense. Just imagine a potential employer's reaction to a badly written application letter. Yet, when I was a director of studies I received hundreds of application letters from ESL teachers and I would say only about 20% were well-written. If these teachers had known how to analyze that particular genre, they could have simply taken a sample application letter (e.g., from the internet) and used it as the basis for creating their own. And once teachers have learned this skill they can pass it on to their students. Effective genre analysis is easy to teach and absolutely essential for learners wishing to communicate successfully in writing.

### **Some sample writing genres**

advertisement	advice column	announcement	application letter
article	autobiography	book jacket	brochure
business card	business email	business letter	campaign speech
comic strip	CD review	complaint letter	detective story
diary entry	dictionary entry	encyclopedia entry	eulogy
fairy tale	graph/chart	greeting card	grocery list
guide book entry	historical fiction	horror story	hotel review
informative essay	invitation	manual	memo
menu	movie review	narrative essay	newspaper
notice	obituary	one-act play	personal email
persuasive essay	poem	post card	quiz
radio broadcast	recipe	restaurant review	résumé
short story	song lyrics	storyboard	text message
textbook	travel poster	wanted poster	weblog entry

## Assessment

Too often in assessing writing, teachers focus on the errors students make. What would be far more motivating and effective for learner development would be focusing on what the student got right, rather than wrong. Doing this is more likely to enable the learner to remember the particular thing he/she did well and lead to scaffolding where the student retains what they did well one time and then builds on it the next time. Genre analysis easily lends itself to doing this as what is most important is that the learner is able to produce a sample of the genre with the appropriate characteristics. Therefore when marking students' writing, the teacher can assess the work just by how many characteristics of the genre the student was able to reproduce correctly. Also, since students will have already examined genre samples to determine the characteristics, they could assess each other's writing by looking for the aspects of the genre that it has. This also gives them additional practice in noticing characteristics of genre. Error correction by teacher is optional.

To aid students in assessing each other's writing, you can provide them with a checklist of characteristics of the genre that their writing must have. You can prepare something in advance or just come up with a list on the spot and write it up on the board. Then, if you like, you can actually have the students assess each other by handing them another student's writing and asking them to check on how many items from the total number on the checklist were in the writing. They can also give it a mark based on how many characteristics they found. A sample checklist is below for the application letter.

<b>Genre Characteristic Checklist for Application Letter</b>				
Total out of 35				
<b>Content and organization</b>	<b>in</b>	<b>pl</b>	<b>Style, Language and Effect</b>	
Writer and reader's info			Formal style	
Job applied for			8 expressions (score 1 – 8)	
Where heard about			Present simple	
Education			Past simple	
Experience			Present perfect/perfect cont.	
Suitability			Mostly long sentences	
Knowledge about company			Professionally written	
Request for contact			Sounds enthusiastic	
Offer of further info				
Proper closing				
1 point each for including + 1 for correct placement	10	10		15

## Activities

### **Writing Genre Brainstorm Race**

Divide the board into columns, one column for each team (for small classes, two teams/lines should work fine). Get the students into two teams and get them in lines in front of the board but make sure the first student in the line is a few metres back from the board. Give the first student in each line a board marker. When you say go, the first student in each line runs up to the board, writes a writing genre on the board and runs back to give the next person in line the marker who does the same thing. The students waiting in the line are allowed to confer. Stop the activity and see which group has added the most items. You can eliminate any erroneous ones first, if you like.

Another way to do this activity is to divide the board up into rows as well as columns. Number each row, say, from 1 to 20 (for 20 rows). Tell students before starting that they cannot repeat something another team has thought of and written on the board. After the race is stopped, if you notice any others that other teams came up with first, erase them. You can determine this by looking at the numbered lines on the board. Then eliminate any erroneous ones and count up to see which team contributed the most.

### **Bad Models**

A good way to introduce the characteristics of a genre of writing is to give the students two samples, a good one that adheres to the characteristics of the genre and one that does not. In pairs or small groups, students can compare the two models, decide which one is better and why. In doing so, they will reach some conclusions about the characteristics of the good model.

Once students have learned the characteristics of a particular genre of writing, a fun and effective way of reinforcing and testing their knowledge is to put them in pairs (or threes) and have them write bad models. Essentially this requires them to think about the characteristics and then to purposely not include them or include something different or opposite when they write their sample of the genre. For example, if they had to write a bad application letter, they could do the following:

#### **Content**

Not include content like educational background and/or include extraneous content like family history.

#### **Organization**

Paragraphs could be left out, scrambled, split or joined together. For example, the whole letter could be one paragraph. Or perhaps the educational and employment information could be in the first paragraph.

The layout could be changed. For example, the date could be moved to the bottom of the page. The letter could be centred instead of justified left. Also