

# Asking Questions

The word *genre* refers to a group of documents that all share similar features. As a college student, you will be expected to write a number of different genres—essays, reviews, letters, presentations, and so on. As an employee of a business, you might encounter a different set of genres, such as proposals, profiles, reports, and more. We can't fit all of these different genres into one book, but we can give you tools: tools to help you learn about genres and tools to help you write them.

This chapter will teach you to identify a genre by asking questions.

## A. What Is a Genre?

Read the passage below, published in 1855; it is an excerpt from an autobiographical narrative written by Frederick Douglass, an American author, orator, abolitionist, and escaped slave.

### EXAMPLE 1: Frederick Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom" (excerpt)

Once in Baltimore, with hard brick pavements under my feet, which almost raised blisters, by their very heat, for it was in the height of summer; walled in on all sides by towering brick buildings; with troops of hostile boys ready to pounce upon me at every street corner; with new and strange objects glaring upon me at every step, and with startling sounds reaching my ears from all directions, I for a time thought that, after all, the home plantation was a more desirable place of residence than my home on Alliciana street, in Baltimore. My country eyes and ears were confused and bewildered here; but the boys were my chief trouble. They chased me, and called me "*Eastern Shore man*," till really I almost wished myself back on the Eastern Shore. I had to undergo a sort of moral acclimation, and when that was over, I did much better.

My new mistress happily proved to be all she *seemed* to be, when, with her husband, she met me at the door, with a most beaming, benignant countenance. She was, naturally, of an excellent disposition, kind, gentle and cheerful. . . . I hardly knew how to behave toward "Miss Sopha," as I used to call Mrs. Hugh Auld. I had been treated as a *pig* on the plantation; I was treated as a *child* now. I could not even approach her as I had formerly approached Mrs. Thomas Auld. How could I hang down my head, and speak with bated breath, when there was no pride to scorn me, no coldness to repel me, and no hatred to inspire me with fear? I therefore soon learned to regard her as something more akin to a mother, than a slaveholding mistress. . . .

Mrs. Auld was not only a kind-hearted woman, but she was remarkably pious; frequent in her attendance of public worship, much given to reading the bible, and to chanting hymns of praise, when alone. . . . The frequent hearing of my mistress reading the bible for she often read aloud when her husband was absent soon awakened my curiosity in respect to this *mystery* of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn. Having no fear of my kind mistress before my eyes (she had then given me no reason to fear), I frankly asked her to teach me to read; and, without hesitation, the dear woman began the task, and very soon, by her assistance, I was master of the alphabet, and could spell words of three or four letters. My mistress seemed almost as proud of my progress, as if I had been her own child; and, supposing that her husband would be as well pleased, she made no secret of what she was doing for me. Indeed, she exultingly told him of the aptness of her pupil, of her intention to persevere in teaching me, and of the duty which she felt it to teach me, at least to read *the bible*. Here arose the first cloud over my Baltimore prospects, the precursor of drenching rains and chilling blasts.

Master Hugh was amazed at the simplicity of his spouse, and, probably for the first time, he unfolded to her the true philosophy of slavery, and the peculiar rules necessary to be observed by masters and mistresses, in the management of their human chattels. Mr. Auld promptly forbade continuance of her instruction; telling her, in the first place, that the thing itself was unlawful; that it was also unsafe, and could only lead to mischief. To use his own words, further, he said, "if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell;" "he should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it;" "if you teach that nigger—speaking of myself—how to read the bible, there will be no keeping him;" "it would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave;" and "as to himself, learning would do him no good, but probably, a great deal of harm—making him disconsolate and unhappy." "If you learn him now to read, he'll want to know how to write; and, this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself." Such was the tenor of Master Hugh's oracular exposition of the true philosophy of training a human chattel; and it must be confessed that he very clearly comprehended the nature and the requirements of the relation of master and slave. His discourse was the first decidedly anti-slavery lecture to which it had been my lot to listen. Mrs. Auld evidently felt the force of his remarks; and, like an obedient wife, began to shape her course in the direction indicated by her husband.

The effect of his words, *on me*, was neither slight nor transitory. His iron sentences— 5 cold and harsh—sunk deep into my heart, and stirred up not only my feelings into a sort of rebellion, but awakened within me a slumbering train of vital thought. It was a new and special revelation, dispelling a painful mystery, against which my youthful understanding had struggled, and struggled in vain, to wit: the *white* man's power to perpetuate the enslavement of the *black* man. "Very well," thought I; "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave." I instinctively assented to the proposition; and from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom. This was just what I needed; and I got it at a time, and from a source, whence I least expected it. I was saddened at the thought of losing the assistance of my kind mistress; but the information, so instantly derived, to some extent compensated me for the loss I had sustained in this direction. Wise as Mr. Auld was, he evidently underrated my comprehension, and had little idea of the use to which I was capable of

putting the impressive lesson he was giving to his wife. *He* wanted me to be a *slave*; I had already voted against that on the home plantation of Col. Lloyd. That which he most loved I most hated; and the very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance, only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence. In learning to read, therefore, I am not sure that I do not owe quite as much to the opposition of my master, as to the kindly assistance of my amiable mistress. I acknowledge the benefit rendered me by the one, and by the other; believing, that but for my mistress, I might have grown up in ignorance.

Now that you have read this passage, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is it?
- Who reads it?
- What's it for?

Let's try to answer these questions by examining the text more closely.

## USE THE TOOLKIT

### What Is It?

Looking at Douglass's story, we see that it is an excerpt of an autobiography. We know this because the introduction to the text tells us so, and because the story uses a key feature of the genre of autobiography: it is written in the first person (using "I"). This excerpt focuses on the subject of learning to read and write: Douglass became a "master of the alphabet" and he learned "to read *the bible*." The excerpt thus tells the story of how Douglass became literate.

Douglass's story of achieving literacy also highlights the connection between literacy and power. Douglass points out the ways that his white slave-owner used "ignorance" to keep Douglass in slavery: "[T]he very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance, only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence."

Given these observations, we can say that the genre of this excerpt is a *literacy narrative*, which is a first-person story about learning to read or write that often highlights the power the narrator gains from literacy.

### Who Reads It?

Frederick Douglass's autobiographies—he wrote more than one—are widely read. *My Bondage and My Freedom* is often read today in high schools and colleges in the United States, usually to teach students about the history of slavery.

This specific excerpt, however, is also widely taught as a classic example of the genre of the literacy narrative. Literacy narratives are used by students of education, English, language acquisition, and other academic disciplines to explore the

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powerful impact that learning to read and write can have on individuals as well as on groups.

At the time Douglass wrote his autobiographies, however, the books were important political documents. Douglass and other abolitionists used an autobiography to educate readers about slaves' experiences. Often, these readers would never have known an enslaved person, so Douglass's book would be their only insight into the mind of a former slave. Today, literacy narratives continue to serve a political purpose: for example, to help argue for improved access to educational resources in underserved communities.

## What's It For?

At the time he published this autobiography, Douglass would have had multiple purposes for the book. He would have wanted to educate northern, white readers about slavery. He would have wanted to persuade these readers to support abolition of slavery. Many of these readers would have been unfamiliar with the practice of slavery in the American South.

This excerpt, in particular, persuaded readers about the importance of education in the abolition of slavery. As a literacy narrative, the excerpt highlights how slave-holders deliberately withheld education from enslaved people in order to keep them enslaved. When Douglass wrote that "[education] would forever unfit [a slave] for the duties of a slave," he suggested that educating slaves would be a powerful form of rebellion. In this way, Douglass's book also served as a guidebook for escaping slavery.

## Congratulations: You Have Just Discovered a Genre

These three questions—*What is it? Who reads it? What's it for?*—will guide you whenever you encounter a new kind of document, or genre.

This book introduces you to the notion of genre as a way to advance your writing skills. In simple terms, a genre is a group of documents that share similarities (called *conventions*).

By studying a genre, you can learn about the goals of writers, the needs of readers, and the kinds of information to include. You can learn about how best to organize a document, how to format it, and what kind of words to use. You can also learn about *why* people write a genre in a particular way.

The conventions of a genre arise in response to situations in which a certain kind of author needs to communicate a certain kind of a message to a certain kind of audience. When situations recur over and over again, they often give rise to genres. The literacy narrative has become a genre in response to situations in which people are excluded or oppressed on the basis of their ability to read and write.

Situations create a need to communicate, and genres arise to fill this need. We call these situations *rhetorical situations* because they present a particular need or

opportunity for communication. By *rhetoric*, we mean any attempt to communicate something to an audience—to inform, persuade, challenge, or argue (Chapter 2).

Here are two more literacy narratives to consider. As you read them, think about the genre toolkit questions. What is it? Who reads it? What's it for?

### EXAMPLE 2: Abida Sultaan, "Memoirs of a Rebel Princess" (excerpt)

This excerpt is from the autobiography *Memoirs of a Rebel Princess* by Abida Sultaan (1913–2002), an Indian royal and statesperson whose diaries of the twentieth century histories of India and Pakistan present a unique portrait of a vibrant, active life: she was a hunter, a pilot, a sportswoman, a leader, a mother, and a scholar. The following excerpt relates the story of Sultaan's coming to literacy, when she first learned to read the Koran, and how her family celebrated her feat. As you read, think about any preconceptions you might have about gender, Islam, and politics.

Among Muslims, a child's formal education used to start with the Holy Quran when the child reached the age of 4 years, 4 months, and 4 days; the ceremony being called the Bismillah. Born on 28 August 1913 the fateful beginning of my formal education began on New Year's Day 1918. I was at an age when I had begun to appreciate the significance of dates and looked forward to birthdays, Eids, Christmas or New Year, which brought presents, toys and Christmas trees for us children. For the New Year, I had been promised the "greatest gift" of my life—the Bismillah—and I had been looking forward to it as another joyful celebration. Little did I realize what the event held in store for me. Whatever blessings this auspicious New Year may have spelt for Sarkar Amman [Sultaan's grandmother, and the ruler of Bhopal], the drudgery, torture and misery that I suffered from that day onwards was a long nightmare that had a defining influence on my personality and my attitude to life.

Ever since my birth, I had shared Sarkar Amman's apartments and had been put to sleep in a cot placed next to her bed. Now, with the Bismillah, she started waking me up before dawn to perform the *namaz-i-fajr* [early morning prayers]: I was supposed to do the *wuzoo* [ablutions] in ice-cold water and after prayers, report to her for the Quran.

Still half asleep and with eyes closed, I would stagger into the bathroom and promptly put myself to sleep in the empty bathtub until some anxious attendant pulled me out and splashed water on my face, and hurried me off to an impatient Sarkar Amman.

"Have you said your prayers?" she would sternly demand.

5 "Yes." I would lie!

"Then get your Quran." She would growl.

There never seemed to be an end to my Quran. Either I had to recite my lesson to Sarkar Amman's complete satisfaction, or be kept sitting in front of her, chanting and swaying in typical *mullah* style. As we had no electricity, I would read my lesson

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under a kerosene lamp until daybreak while Sarkar Amman would remain on her *janamaz* [prayer mat] telling her beads or performing additional prayers until 9 a.m. The slightest mistake would draw an angry response, or a slap, from Sarkar Amman. Further mistakes would lead to pinching, tweaking my nose, ear bashing or even knocking my head against the wall.

Then she would transfer me, my Quran and herself, to her little white mattress spread on the floor in the main courtyard. Surrounded by visitors, petitioners, secretaries, Dr. Johory (her personal physician) and several black boxes containing state papers, she would attend to all of us at the same time. The slightest mistake did not escape her notice and no matter how intensely she was occupied, she would react to any mistake with another sharp slap across my face in full public view.

When I started crying, I would be unable to stop and the more I cried, the more I was slapped. Almost tearing off my ears, she would swing my head from side to side and knock it against the wall. To introduce more variety to her punishments, she would pull at my eyelids, pinch my cheeks, or twist my nose, leaving dark bruises and hard lumps all over my face, my nose, behind my ears and on my eyelids. . . .

On the other hand, there were days when I rebelled after the first slap or two and stopped reading. Then no matter how I was tormented, slapped or pinched, I would not utter a single word even though it meant missing my lunch or dinner. It became a test of wills between grandmother and granddaughter. I would go on strike by standing silently without uttering a sound while Sarkar tried to pinch, slap or shake me into submission. Even as a child the rebel in me could not be suppressed and the standoff usually ended with Sarkar Amman giving up—and starting my lessons later. At 9 p.m. sharp, I had to be in bed, next to Sarkar Amman's, where she would be sitting with several of her ladies, cutting *chhalia* [betel nut] until she was ready for her *tahajjud* prayers. No one spoke unless spoken to by Sarkar Amman. So my early childhood was filled with memories of drudgery and interminable torment at the hands of my grandmother.

However, by the tender age of six I had earned the distinction of being the first and only member of Sarkar Amman's family to have completed the Arabic version of the Quran. Bursting with pride and affection, Sarkar Amman generously distributed sweets and rewarded me with a one-day holiday and a kiss! No one had ever kissed me before! Briefly, a light had appeared at the end of a dark, grim tunnel.

By 1921, I had earned my second distinction. I had memorized the *lafzi tarjuma* [the word for word translation of the Quran] before my eighth birthday. As the Quran is in Arabic, which was not taught as a language, the completion of the *lafzi tarjuma* amounted to a remarkable feat of memory achieved by me between the age of six and eight.

Now Sarkar Amman really did explode with pride, "My Abida is incomparable and will be rewarded with a *Nashra* [a ceremony held on completing the first reading of the Quran] ceremony that will put all royal weddings to shame," she announced. I was given a whole week off. It was my first long holiday since the Bismillah four years earlier! After four dark years it seemed that I had stepped out into the sunlight.

### EXAMPLE 3: Amy Tan, "Mother Tongue"

The literacy narrative excerpted here, titled "Mother Tongue," is written by novelist Amy Tan, daughter of Chinese immigrants. Tan's novels, including *The Joy Luck Club*, have won numerous awards. "Mother Tongue" was originally published in *The Threepenny Review*, a literary journal, in 1990.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, *The Joy Luck Club*. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, "The intersection of memory upon imagination" and "There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus"—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: "Not waste money that way." My husband was with us as well, and he didn't notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It's because over the twenty years we've been together I've often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

So you'll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds like, I'll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation which I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family's, Du, and how the gangster in his early years wanted to be adopted by her family, which was rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother's family, and one day showed up at my mother's wedding to pay his respects. Here's what she said in part: "Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming Island people. The local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn't look down on him, but didn't take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don't stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won't have to stay too long. He come to my wedding, I didn't see, I heard it. I gone to boy's side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen."

You should know that my mother's expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the *Forbes* report, listens to *Wall Street Week*, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine's books with ease—all kinds of things I can't begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand 50 percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand 80 to 90 percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I've been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as "broken" or "fractured" English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say, that is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money."

And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week." And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not

apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English—lo and behold—we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, I.Q. tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-plus, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A's and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was \_\_\_\_\_, Mary thought he was \_\_\_\_\_." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming" with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous." Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship—for example, "Sunset is to nightfall as \_\_\_\_\_ is to \_\_\_\_\_." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: red is to stoplight, bus is to arrival, chills is to fever, yawn is to boring; Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, "sunset is to nightfall"—and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words—red, bus, stoplight, boring—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: "A sunset precedes nightfall" is the same as "a chill precedes a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an

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associative situation, for example, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can't begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn't until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here's an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.” A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won't get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”



### EXERCISE 1.1: Evaluate a Literacy Narrative

For Sultaan's or Tan's text, answer the following questions:

1. What is it? Is it a literacy narrative? Why or why not? What features does it share with Douglass's narrative?
2. What kind of person authored this literacy narrative? What can you tell about her personal history just from this story about literacy?
3. Who reads it? (List all possible audiences of this literacy narrative.)
4. What is it for? Why might the author have written this literacy narrative? What kind of message is the author trying to get across with this literacy narrative? Are there multiple messages? What are they?
5. In what ways are literacy and power connected in this literacy narrative?



### GROUP ACTIVITY 1.1: Compare Literacy Narratives

Compare all three literacy narratives using the chart below:

|                                                     | DOUGLASS | SULTAAN | TAN |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|-----|
| What is it?<br>(Describe the text.)                 |          |         |     |
| Who reads it?<br>(Name the audiences.)              |          |         |     |
| What's it for?<br>(List the purposes and messages.) |          |         |     |

## B. "What Is It?": Identify Shared Conventions

In the first part of this chapter, you learned how to ask the right questions in order to analyze a genre. Writers analyze genres in order to write more effectively. If you know what you need to communicate in your document and who will be reading it (and what they expect to see), you will write a better document. Asking the right questions helps you to write the most effective document.

In the rest of this chapter, we're going to delve more deeply into these three questions in order to better understand how a genre works.

Experienced writers know that any document they write has to conform—at least somewhat—to the conventions of the document's genre. Otherwise, readers may be confused by the document. Experienced writers familiarize themselves with conventions in order to know what they need to write—and where they can bend the rules.

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When you compare the three preceding literacy narratives, can you identify any qualities (or conventions) that the narratives have in common? Let's make a list:

- All three literacy narratives tell a story.
- All three literacy narratives use the first-person singular pronoun "I."
- All three literacy narratives emphasize the connection between literacy and power: Douglass connects education with freedom; Sultaan connects her learning to read the Koran with power struggles with her grandmother; Tan discusses how her limited English "limit[ed] my possibilities in life."
- All three literacy narratives tell a story of transition from illiteracy and disempowerment to literacy and empowerment.

Can you think of anything else?

Although these three literacy narratives cannot fully represent the range and diversity of all existing literacy narratives, we are already getting a picture of what sorts of conventions literacy narratives tend to share.

Despite these similarities, though, the exact form a literacy narrative can take depends on a range of choices an author can make based on readers (or audience), where the document will be published (if applicable), who the author is, and so on.

Accordingly, when you are asked to compose a genre that is new to you (such as a literacy narrative), your best first step is to do a little research. This approach works for academic assignments as well as for workplace assignments. If you look at samples of an unfamiliar genre, you can figure out a lot about your audience, the format your document should take, what to include, and what kind of style to use.

You may be tempted to look for cookie-cutter templates for each genre, like the document templates that come with many word-processing programs. While there are commonalities between examples of a genre, simply filling in a template with your ideas makes writing a pretty boring process. Boring writing leads to bored readers, and bored readers do not pay attention to what they are reading. In addition, templates don't tell you much about the choices you can make to get your message across or to interest your readers.

## Everyday Genres

While the literacy narratives you just read were published in books and magazines and intended for wide audiences, other genres are more common.

You may be surprised by how many genres you use for different writing tasks every day. For example, a text message is a genre, as is an email. A grocery list is also a genre, one that has a variety of conventions that a writer can choose from.

When you write these genres, you probably don't follow a template, but you probably do use some shared conventions. For example, your grocery list will obviously include the different items you plan to purchase because listing those items is the purpose of the genre. But the list may be bulleted or numbered, handwritten or typed into a smartphone, organized by supermarket section or according to the

recipes you plan to make. These choices make the grocery list genre more flexible than a rigid template.

You might even ignore some of the conventions—perhaps you mix “to do” items in with your grocery list, or maybe you have your own unique way of remembering what items to get.

### EXAMPLE 4: Numbered Grocery List

| Groceries                     |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Produce                    |  |
| - Apples (4)                  |  |
| - Grapes (1 lb)               |  |
| - Bananas (1 bunch)           |  |
| - Tomatoes (6)                |  |
| 2. Starches                   |  |
| - Bread (1 loaf)              |  |
| - Tortillas (1 package of 12) |  |
| 3. Meats                      |  |
| - Ground beef (2 pounds)      |  |
| - Bratwurst (6)               |  |

### EXAMPLE 5: Plain Grocery List

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Milk            |  |
| Eggs            |  |
| Ice cream       |  |
| Cheese          |  |
| Spaghetti sauce |  |
| Penne           |  |

The next time you write something—anything—think about how many times you have written the same type of document before. Are you writing a genre with shared conventions? What conventions do you tend to follow, and what ones do you ignore? Which conventions are optional, and which ones are necessary?

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**EXERCISE 1.2: Discover Conventions of Everyday Genres**

Make a list of three or four genres you write on a daily or weekly basis (such as a text message, grocery list, or journal entry). For each genre, answer the following questions:

1. What is it?
2. What conventions do you repeat every time you write this genre?
3. What conventions do you change or ignore?
4. How do you decide to change or ignore certain conventions?

**MULTIMEDIA EXERCISE 1.1: Compare Written and Digital Conventions**

Think of a traditional print genre (such as a letter). Next, think of a genre that is similar to the traditional print genre that only exists online or in a digital format (such as email). Answer the following questions:

1. How are the conventions of the online/digital genre different from the print genre?
2. What conventions does the digital genre share with the print genre?

**C. "Who Reads It?": Identify an Audience**

Experienced writers know that an effective document satisfies their audiences' expectations for that genre. For example, readers of literacy narratives expect stories that describe how an author learned a new language and simultaneously gained power (financial, political, or cultural).

Thus, when you write any genre (not just genres for school), you must always keep your audience's expectations in mind.

In the workplace, for example, you might prepare a résumé. No audience expects to read a résumé written in crayon on construction paper. Instead, because résumés are usually written by people seeking employment, readers expect résumés to present a polished and professional image. Indeed, readers expect that a résumé will provide information about the writer's work experience, education, and relevant skills in a professionally designed document. However, this does not mean that the résumé is just a template to fill out. Instead, you can creatively shape a résumé to fit within the parameters of the genre based on what your *particular* audience might want to see (Chapter 2).

For instance, you may place your work experience before your education, if your audience is interested in applicants with significant work experience. You may or may not include an “Objective” statement depending on whether résumés in your desired profession tend to use them, or whether you want to highlight a particular skill for your readers. You may include many items about yourself (and write a longer résumé) or you may select only the most persuasive elements to include (and write a shorter résumé). Employers usually expect longer résumés for more advanced positions, since applicants tend to have more work experience. All of these choices depend in part on your audience and what effect you hope to have on it.

For any writing task, you should start by considering your audience, thinking through who your readers will be.



### EXERCISE 1.3: Identify the Audience

Pick one of the everyday genres that you identified in Exercise 1.2, or pick another genre that you write on a regular basis. Answer the following questions about the audiences for that genre:

1. Who will read this document? Yourself? Others? A large audience, or small?
2. What will the reader do with this document?
3. How will the reader read it? In print? Online? In a book? On a bulletin board?



### MULTIMEDIA EXERCISE 1.2: Identify Your Preferences as a Reader

Think of a genre that you read online on a regular basis, such as a blog or an online newspaper. Answer the following questions from the perspective of the genre's audience:

1. Why do you enjoy reading this genre?
2. When do you usually read this genre and on what device? (For example: On a mobile phone? Tablet? Laptop or desktop computer?)
3. How do the genre's conventions make it easy and/or difficult for you to read the genre on your preferred device?

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## D. "What's It For?": Identify a Genre's Purpose

When analyzing examples of a genre, think explicitly about the genre's purpose or purposes. Why does this genre exist? What need does it fulfill, or what task does it accomplish?

Genres emerge when writers and readers need to address a situation that occurs over and over again. For example, one of the recurring needs met by the literacy narrative genre today is the validation of nonstandard language practices and immigrant dialects, as Amy Tan does in "Mother Tongue."

Now, think about the purposes of some everyday genres that you are familiar with. For example, the purpose of an invitation is to inform readers about the place, time, and reason for an event, and to encourage them to attend. The genre of the invitation is continually evolving to keep pace with new kinds of technology (like Evites or Facebook "events") and changing social conventions (like parties to celebrate divorces, or funerals for pets).

The purpose of another everyday genre, the restaurant menu, is to inform diners about the food options available at the restaurant and to encourage customers to purchase them. Again, dining out is a common event, so it is not surprising that the genre of the menu has developed to address that purpose and that it continues to evolve as technology evolves (for example, ordering food from an online menu to have delivered to your home).

When you are assigned to write an unfamiliar genre (either in a course or in the workplace), and you are examining samples of the genre for guidance, think about what other authors who have written the genre intended their documents to do.

### EXERCISE 1.4: Identify a Genre's Purpose



Pick one of the everyday genres that you encounter often. Answer the following questions:

1. What need does this genre address? What problem does this genre seek to fix?
2. How do you know, based solely on the document you are reading?

### MULTIMEDIA EXERCISE 1.3: Identify an Online Author's Purpose



Pick one of the online genres that you read every day (such as a blog or social network newsfeed). Answer the questions in Exercise 1.4.

## E. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed three basic questions you can use when you encounter a new genre. These three questions are the basis of the “genre toolkit.”

### Ask Questions

What is it?  
Who reads it?  
What's it for?

The three genre toolkit questions help you begin to analyze a genre. But what happens when you are in a situation where you need to write a document yourself? In Chapter 2, you will learn how to assess your own rhetorical situation and figure out where you stand.

## F. Chapter Project: Write a Literacy Narrative

For this chapter project, you will write a literacy narrative. Remember, a literacy narrative is a first-person story about learning to read or write that often highlights the power the narrator gains from literacy.

Start by thinking of moments in your life when you encountered barriers posed by language. These moments might have occurred when you were a child, before you learned to read or write. They might have occurred as you learned more advanced literacy skills in school. They might have occurred when you encountered a foreign language or unfamiliar dialect.

Then, think about your audience and purpose. Who might read your narrative? What message do you want to get across?

Take another look at the examples of literacy narratives in this chapter (and perhaps search online for additional examples of literacy narratives) to determine what conventions of literacy narratives you'd like to use—and which you might like to ignore—based on your own purpose and audience for this project.

### Multimedia Version

A narrative can be told using a combination of text, images, and sound. Using software that allows you to combine multimedia features, such as Microsoft PowerPoint or Prezi, tell your literacy narrative in a multimedia fashion.

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