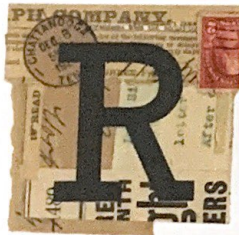


SCENES OF WRITING ONE

Using Genres to Read Scenes of Writing



READING IS NOT just deciphering words on a page—the typical definition of the activity—but also, in a larger sense, observing and making sense of a scene by examining its language, both oral and written.

Reading and writing are interconnected activities that depend on their scenes, situations, and genres. This chapter begins to explore that interconnection and focuses on the concept of **genre**, which we defined as *the typical rhetorical ways of responding to a repeated situation within a scene*. You will learn in this chapter how to read and analyze genres in order to access and understand scenes and situations. You will then practice using that analysis to make informed choices in your writing.

READING SCENES, SITUATIONS, AND GENRES

We explored how writing is enmeshed within scenes and the specific situations within them. Reading, too, is enmeshed within situations and scenes. When you pick up a book to read, you usually know already what genre the book is: mystery, romance, biography, or textbook, for example. The same is true for shorter kinds of texts, whether letters from friends, sales letters, application forms, or e-mail messages. Your knowledge of the genre provides you with a mental framework for how to read it; it gives you a set of guidelines, what reading specialist Frank Smith calls “specifications,” for how to approach and make sense of a text. Because you know the genre, you are already on your way to knowing how to read the text.

You know a great deal about many scenes and situations as well as about the expectations of the genres involved. If you pick up a sales letter, for example, you know these elements of the scene and situation: The writer is acting as a sales agent, not as a friend or colleague; the subject of the letter will be some product; the writer's primary purpose is to sell you something; and you are being treated as someone who is in a position to buy the product. Because you know the scene of sales letters, you know that someone thought you would share the writer's interest in the product, but you also suspect that the information in the letter will not necessarily be unbiased or fully accurate.

You probably do not think about this knowledge consciously, but you reflect it in your decisions about how to act in response to the text: You might scan for the nature of the product and, if you do not in fact share the writer's interest in the product, you might throw it away without reading further. Similarly, when you pick up a textbook, you know some things about its scene and situation as you begin to read. The *scene* of an assigned text for a course requires that you at least pretend to share the teacher's interest in the subject and that you read the entire text whether that interest is real or feigned. The *situation* places you as a seeker of knowledge and the textbook author as expert, and you read accordingly, highlighting key points, studying definitions, and accepting the information you find in the textbook as accurate. When you read, then, you act on your knowledge of the genre, situation, and scene of the text. ***You not only process the words inscribed on the page; you also read the situation and scene inscribed in the genre.***

People adjust their ways of reading texts to the genres, situations, and scenes that those texts involve. For example, as you have been reading this textbook, you have been acting differently as you read the various genres within it, even though you are probably not aware of those shifting habits. The whole book represents the textbook genre and the scene of a writing class; within it are certain genres of communication which reflect their own scenes and situations. You read the body of this textbook for its information, perhaps highlighting important points or new terms, but you read the Writing Activities differently, perhaps waiting for your teacher to assign them before you consider their content seriously and looking for what you are supposed to do rather than what you are supposed to know. You read the Table of Contents differently again, just seeking page numbers or topics, and you read the Index with yet another approach. ***This process of negotiation, of repositioning ourselves from one scene to the next and at times within***

multiple scenes at once, is not the result of guesswork; it is not a random process. Rather, it involves a complex, active process of reading.

Sometimes, though, we get it wrong. We learned about what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*, the art of timing communication correctly. Imagine someone who always misreads scenes, who is constantly saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, like a character in a *Saturday Night Live* skit whose contributions to a conversation are always two topics behind the rest. When others have moved on from discussing the boss's hairpiece to discussing an upcoming concert, the misreading character chimes in with, "And it doesn't even match his hair's real color!" Misreading a scene leads to gaffes and ineffectiveness (in less extreme ways probably) for each of us. We may make a joke in class that a classmate finds offensive, or we might request something of a boss in a way that gets an immediate denial. Sometimes, we misread a scene on purpose, trying to find a way to get other people's attention or to protest accepted behavior. A protester can shout out during a lecture, or a student can refuse to follow a paper assignment (turning in a collage instead of a history paper). Sometimes, though, we are just so unfamiliar with a scene that we fail to read it accurately or completely. The first time we go to a formal party, we may not know what to expect, how to dress, or what kinds of conversations we will have. Learning how to read formal invitations, though, can give us some clues that will help us prepare. Similarly, the first time we want to join a public discussion about a current issue, we can begin more effectively by learning how to read such public genres as editorials and letters to the editor. In both cases, the genres, as typical ways of communicating and acting in their scenes, contain clues about how we can communicate and act effectively in these scenes. Learning how to analyze genres will help you read unfamiliar scenes as well as to think consciously about familiar scenes so you can choose how to act in them as writers.

Writing Activity 1 List at least 10 different genres you read, including if possible at least one genre that you read on a computer. Remember to include not just formal or school genres and not just literary genres but also the everyday genres you read, like the backs of cereal boxes. Then pick three of these genres and write a paragraph describing how differently you read each of them. How does your reading of a cereal box differ from your reading of textbooks and sales letters, for example?